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SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

FANTASTIC

FEBRUARY, 1970

Vol. 19, No. 3

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TED WHITE = EDITORIAL

As I write this, our October issue has been on sale about two weeks, and the flood of letters (as you can see from the length of our letter column this issue) has been gratifying. Clearly, a great many of you were only awaiting for a signal to write—and the truncated version of *According to You* in that issue was all the signal you needed. My fears that FANTASTIC could not generate the sort of reader response AMAZING has been enjoying were clearly wrong—and I'm glad of it.

The letters published in this issue are only a sampling of those we've received thus far—and they're still coming in at a rate of two to five a day! (That doesn't sound like much until you start totalling them up and discover that in a single month we've received around or over a hundred letters! Just two months ago, the total number of letters addressed to FANTASTIC was less than a dozen, and two months before that, we were averaging only one or two an issue.)

I personally read each and every letter that comes in—and with all the excitement of a young fan receiving mail on his first published fanzine. Naturally, I don't agree with all the suggestions and comments made, but by and large you've had remarkably sensible things to say—even when totally disagreeing with each other.

Some of your suggestions have already been dealt with—the bulk of your complaints about the reprints, for example. Requests for specific authors are usually beyond our power to comply with immediately, although I have been opening up FANTASTIC to bring in not only the best of the fresh new writers, but as many of the fine older, established authors as well. I have no “stable” of writers, and my basic criterion is the quality of a story—not the name of its author.

Our present policy is to present to you in each issue half of a full, book-length novel, plus shorter novelettes and short

stories. Now, frankly the phrase "book-length" and the word "novel" have been badly overused by the magazines—both within and outside our field. And we've been as guilty as anyone. My story, "It Could Be Anywhere," in the October issue, was not, truthfully, a "short novel." Nor should it have been called that. At a little less than 17,000 words, it was an honest "novelette" or a novella (by some yardsticks). But in actual wordage it was only something like a quarter of a novel, as we presently define that term.

But Piers Anthony's "Hasan" most certainly is a novel. It runs about 87,000 words (the usual definition of a novel is 50,000 words or more), and each instalment has been a hefty 43,500 or so words. Many of our competitors would call a story of less than that length (40,000 words or less) a "hook-length novel," despite the fact that hooks have not yet shrunk to that extent. We are purchasing novels of 60,000 words and up, for the most part; "Emphyrio" ran 70,000 words, and the recent novels serialized in our sister magazine, AMAZING STORIES, have run no less.

Among the letters which have been coming in, reaction to my editorial in the October issue has been strong—both favorable and unfavorable. You'll find a number of those reactions in the letters section this issue.

All of you seem to welcome the direct style I've employed—I've deliberately avoided the "editorial We"; when I say "we" I am talking about more than myself—and the general reaction seems to favor my choice of topics for these editorials. But a few of you objected strongly to my editorial in the October issue—and felt that a discussion of censorship, morals and mores was out of place in "an entertainment magazine"

Frankly, I do not plan my editorials long in advance of writing them. They are not designed to be neat, capsulized essays, or formal articles which might as easily appear in another magazine altogether. They are my spontaneous response to the magazine I am putting together at that moment, and to the thinking and topics in the air at that time. For example, when I wrote that October editorial the press was full of comment on the Smothers Brothers cancellation, and it related to the topic of our *Fantasy Fandom* piece in that same issue. (There is no *Fantasy Fandom* department this issue for two reasons: first, the flood of letters was so strong that I had to cut back somewhere; and second, I simply did not find anything in the fanzines this month which I thought warranted publication here. But it should be back next issue.) And of course last issue my editorial revolved about "Hasan." Those two editorials were poles apart in topic and type, but both were what I wanted to write at the time.

It seems to me that *communication* is the real point of an editorial. It is the soap box from which the editor introduces his issue, remarks upon that which strikes him as pertinent, and opens up the rest of the magazine to his readers. We are miles apart in space and months apart in time, you and I (I am writing this in early August; you will be reading it in late November or December), but this issue of FANTASTIC, like each issue, is our common experience. Through it, we meet. This meeting is, I think, what a *magazine* is all about, and what distinguishes it from the average anthology of short stories in book form.

Several of you have suggested topics for future editorials, ranging from behind-the-scenes explanations of how a

(continued on page 143)

Robert Bloch carves out a grim vignette of death and magic in the tawdry world of the Carny as he explains why there's nothing lower than being a geek in the sideshow . . .

DOUBLE WHAMMY

ROBERT BLOCH

illustrated by MICHAEL HINGE

ROD PULLED the chicken out of the burlap bag and threw it down into the pit.

The chicken squawked and fluttered, and Rod glanced away quickly. The gaping crowd gathered around the canvas walls of the pit ignored him; now all the eyes were focussed on what was happening down below. There was a cackling, a scrabbling sound, and then a sudden sharp simultaneous intake of breath from the spectators.

Rod didn't have to look. He knew that the geek had caught the chicken.

Then the crowd began to roar. It was a strange noise, compounded of women's screams, high harsh laughter teetering on the edge of hysteria, and deep hoarse masculine murmurs of shocked dismay.

Rod knew what *that* sound meant, too.

The geek was biting off the chicken's head.

Rod stumbled out of the little tent, not looking back, grateful for the cool night air that fanned his sweating face. His shirt was soaked through under the cheap blazer. He'd have to change again before he went up on the outside platform to make his next pitch.

The pitch itself didn't bother him. Being a talker was his job and he was good at it; he liked conning the marks and

turning the tip. Standing up there in front of the bloody banners and spieiing about the Strange People always gave him his kicks, even if he was only working for a lousy mudshow that never played anywhere north of Tennessee. For three seasons straight he'd been with it, he was a pro, a real carny.

But now, all of a sudden, something was spooking him. No use kidding himself, he had to face it.

Rod was afraid of the geek.

He crossed behind the ten-in-one tent and moved in the direction of his little trailer, pulling out a handkerchief and wiping his forehead. That helped a little, but he couldn't wipe away what was inside his head. The cold, clammy fear was always there now, night and day.

Hell of it was, it didn't make sense. The Monarch of Mirth Shows had always worked "strong"—out here in the old boondocks you could still get away with murder, particularly if you were only killing chickens. And who gives a damn about chickens, anyway? The butchers chop off a million heads a day. A chicken is just a lousy bird, and a geek is just a lousy wino. A rumdum who hooks up with a carny, puts on a phoney wild-man outfit and hops around in the bottom of a canvas enclosure while the talker gives

the crowd a line about this ferocious monster, half man and half beast. Then the talker throws in the chicken and the geek does his thing.

Rod shook his head, but what was inside it didn't move. It stayed there, cold and clammy and coiled up in a ball. It had been there almost ever since the beginning of this season, and now Rod was conscious that it was growing. The fear was getting bigger.

But why? He'd worked with half a dozen luses over the past three years. Maybe biting the head off a live chicken wasn't exactly the greatest way to make a living, but if the geeks didn't mind, why should he care? And Rod knew that a geek wasn't really a monster, just a poor old futz who was down on his luck and hooked on the sauce—willing to do anything, as long as he got his daily ration of popskull.

This season the geek they took on was named Mike. A quiet guy who kept out of everybody's way when he wasn't working; under the burnt-cork makeup he had the sad, wrinkled face of a man of fifty. Fifty hard years, perhaps thirty of them years of hard drinking. He never talked, just took his pint and curled up in the canvas on one of the trucks. Looking at him then, Rod was never spooked; if anything, he felt kind of sorry for the poor bastard.

It was only when the geek was in the pit that Rod felt that ball of fear uncoil. When he saw the wooly wig and the black face, the painted hands that clutched and clawed—yes, and when he saw the grinning mouth open to reveal the rotting yellow teeth, ready to bite—

Oh, it was getting to him all right, he was really up tight now. But nobody else knew. And nobody *would* know. Rod wasn't about to spill his guts to anyone here on the lot, and how would it look if



he ran off to some head-shrinker and said, "Hey, Doc, help me—I'm afraid I'm gonna turn into a geek." He knew better than that. No shrinker could help him, and come what may he'd never end up geeking for a living. He'd lick this thing himself; he had to, and he would, just as long as no one else caught on and bugged him about it.

Rod climbed the steps, removing his jacket and unbuttoning his wet shirt as he moved up into the darkness of the trailer.

And then he felt the hands sliding across his bare chest, moving up over his shoulders to embrace him, and he smelt the fragrance, felt the warmth and the pressure even as he heard the whispered words. "Rod—darling—are you surprised?"

Truth to tell, Rod wasn't surprised. But he was pleased that she'd been waiting for him. He took her in his arms and glued his mouth to hers as they sank down on the cot.

"Cora," he murmured. "Cora—"

"Shhhh! No time to talk."

She was right. There wasn't time, because he had to be back on the bally platform in fifteen minutes. And it wasn't a smart idea to talk anyway, not with Madame Sylvia sneaking around and popping up out of nowhere just when you least expected her. Why in hell did a swinging bird like Cora have to have an old buzzard like Madame Sylvia for a grandmother?

But Rod wasn't thinking about grandmothers now, and he wasn't thinking about geeks, either. That was what Cora did to him, that was what Cora did for him, dissolving the cold fear in warm, writhing, wanting flesh. At times like these Rod knew why he couldn't cut out, why he stayed with it. Staying with it meant staying with her, and this was

enough; this was everything, with ribbons on it.

It was only later, struggling into his shirt, hearing her whisper, "Please, honey, hurry and let's get out of here before she comes looking for me," that he wondered if it was really worth it. All this horsing around for a fast grope in the dark with a teen-age spick who practically creamed her jeans every time the old lady looked cross-eyed at her.

Sure Cora was a beautiful job, custom-made for him. But when you got right down to it she was still a kid and nobody would ever mistake her brain for a computer. Besides, she was a spick—well, maybe not exactly, but she was a gypsy and that added up the same thing.

Walking back to the bally platform for the last pitch of the evening, Rod decided it was time to cool it. From now on the chill was in.

That night the show folded and trucked to Mazoo County Fair Grounds for a ten-day stand. They were all day setting up and then the crowds surged in, rednecks from the toolies up in the hills; must have been a couple thousand coming in night after night, and all craving action.

For almost a week Rod managed to keep out of Cora's way without making it too obvious. Her grandmother was running the mitt camp concession on the other end of the Midway and Cora was supposed to shill for her; usually she was too busy to sneak off. A couple of times Rod caught sight of her signalling to him from down in the crowd around the bally platform, but he always looked the other way, pretending he didn't see her. And once he heard her scratching on the trailer door in the middle of the night, only he made out that he was asleep, even when she called out to him, and after about ten minutes she went away.

The trouble was, Rod didn't sleep anywhere near that good; seemed like every time he closed his eyes now he could see the pit, see the black geek and the white chicken.

So the next time Cora came scratching on the door he let her in, and for a little while he was out of the pit, safe in her arms. And instead of the geek growling and the chicken cackling he heard her voice in the darkness, her warm, soft voice, murmuring, "You do love me, don't you, Rod?"

The answer came easy, the way it always did. "Course I do. You know that."

Her fingers tightened on his arm. "Then it's all right. We can get married and I'll have the baby—"

"Baby?"

He sat up, fast.

"I wasn't going to tell you, honey, not until I was sure, but I am now." Her voice was vibrant. "Just think, darling—"

He *was* thinking. And when he spoke, his voice was hoarse.

"Your grandmother—Madame Sylvia—does she know?"

"Not yet. I wanted you to come with me when I tell her—"

"Tell her nothing."

"Rod?"

"Tell her nothing. Get rid of it."

"Honey—"

"You heard me."

She tried to hold him then but he wrenched himself free, stood up, reached for his shirt. She was crying now, but the louder she sobbed the more he hurried dressing, just as if she wasn't there. Just as if she wasn't stuttering and stammering all that jazz about what did he mean, he couldn't do this, he had to listen, and if the old lady found out she'd kill her.

Rod wanted to yell at her to shut up, he wanted to crack her one across the mouth and *make* her shut up, but he managed to control himself. And when he did speak his voice was soft.

"Take it easy, sweetheart," he said. "Let's not get ourselves all excited here. There's no problem."

"But I told you—"

He patted her arm in the darkness. "Relax, will you? You got nothing to worry about. You told me yourself the old lady doesn't know. Get rid of it now and she never will."

Christ, it was so simple you'd think even a lame-brain like Cora would understand. But instead she was crying again, louder than ever, and beating on him with her fists.

"No, no you can't make me! We've got to get married, the first time I let you, you promised we would, just as soon as the season was over—"

"As far as I'm concerned, the season's over right now." Rod tried to keep his voice down, but when she came at him again, clinging, somehow it was worse than feeling her fists. He couldn't stand this any more; not the clinging, not the wet whimpering.

"Listen to me, Cora. I'm sorry about what happened, you know that. But you can scrub the marriage bit."

The way she blew then you'd have thought the world was coming to an end, and he had to slap her to keep the whole damn lot from hearing her screech. He felt kind of lousy, belting her one like that, but it quieted her down enough so's he could hustle her out. She went away still crying, but very quietly. And at least she got the message.

Rod didn't see her around the next day, or the one after. But in order to keep her from bugging him again, he spent both

nights over at Boots Donahue's wagon, playing a little stud with the boys. He figured that if there was any trouble and he had to peel off fast, maybe he could turn a few extra hucks for the old grouch-bag.

Only it didn't exactly work out that way. Usually he was pretty lucky with the pasteboards, but he had a had run hoth evenings and ended up in hock for his next three pay-checks. That was had enough, but the next day was worse.

Basket Case gave him the word.

Rod was just heading for the cook tent for breakfast when Basket Case called him over. He was laying on an old army cot outside his trailer with a cigarette in his mouth.

"How's for a light?" he asked.

Rod cupped a match for him, then stuck around, knowing he'd have to flick the ashes while Basket Case had his smoke. And a guy born without arms or legs has a little trouble getting rid of a butt, too.

Funny thing, the Strange People never got to Rod, no matter how peculiar they looked. Even Basket Case, who was just a living head attached to a shapeless hundle of torso, didn't give him the creeps. Maybe it was because old Basket Case himself didn't seem to mind; he just took it for granted that he was a freak. And he always acted and sounded normal, not like that rumdum geek who put on a fright wig and blacked up and made noises like a crazy animal when he went after a chicken—

Rod tried to push away the thought and pulled out a cigarette for himself. He was just getting a match when Basket Case looked up at him.

"Heard the news?" he asked.

"What news?"

"Cora's dead."

Rod burned his fingers and the match dropped away.

"Dead?"

Basket Case nodded. "Last night. Madame Sylvia found her in the trailer after the last show—"

"What happened?"

Basket Case just looked at him. "Thought maybe you could tell me that."

Rod had to choke out the words. "What's that crack supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Basket Case shrugged. "Madame Sylvia told Donahue the kid died of a ruptured appendix."

Rod took a deep breath. He forced himself to look sorry, but all at once he felt good, very good. Until he heard Basket Case saying, "Only thing is, I never heard of anyone rupturing their appendix with a knitting-needle."

Rod reached out and took the cigarette from Basket Case to dump his ashes. The way his hand was trembling, he didn't have to do anything but let them fall.

"The appendix story is just a cover—Madame Sylvia doesn't want the fuzz nosing around." Basket Case nodded as Rod stuck the cigarette back between his lips. "But if you ask me, she knows."

"Now look, if you're saying what I think you're saying, you'd better forget it—"

"Sure, I'll forget it. But *she* won't." Basket Case lowered his voice. "Funeral's this afternoon, over at the county cemetery. You better show your face along with the rest of us, just so it doesn't look funny. After that, my advice to you is cut and run."

"Now wait a minute—" Rod was all set to go on, but what was the use? Basket Case *knew*, and there was no sense putting on an act with him. "I can't run," he said. "I'm into Boots Donahue for three weeks' advance. If I cop out, he'll spread the word around and I won't work

carny again, not in these parts."

Basket Case spat the cigarette out. It landed on the ground beside the cot and Rod stamped it out. Basket Case shook his head. "Never mind the money," he said. "If you don't run, you won't be working anywhere." He glanced around cautiously and when he spoke again his voice was just a whisper. "Don't you understand? This is the crunch—I tell you, Madame Sylvia knows what happened."

Rod wasn't about to whisper. "That old hat? You said yourself she doesn't want any truck with the fuzz, and even if she did, she couldn't prove anything. So what's to be afraid of?"

"The double whammy," said Basket Case.

Rod blinked at him.

"Want me to spell it out for you? Three seasons ago, just before you came with the show, fella name of Richy was boss canvasman. Mighty nice guy, but he had a problem—he was scared of snakes. Babe Flynn was working them, had a hunch of constrictors, all standards for her act and harmless as they come. But Richey had such a thing about snakes he wouldn't even go near her wagon.

"Where he went wrong was, he went near Madame Sylvia's wagon. Cora was pretty young then, just budding out you might say, but that didn't stop Richey from making his move. Nothing serious, only conversation. How the old lady found out about it I don't know and how she found out he was spooked on snakes I don't know either, because he always tried to hide it, of course.

"But one afternoon, last day of our stand in Red Clay it was, Madame Sylvia took a little walk over to Richey's trailer. He was standing outside, shaving, with a mirror hung up on the door.

"She didn't say anything to him, didn't even look at him—just stared at his reflection in the mirror. Then she made a couple of passes and mumbled something under her breath and walked away. That's all there was to it.

"Next morning, Richey didn't show up. They found him lying on the floor inside his trailer, deader'n a mackerel. Half his bones were broken and the way the body was crushed you'd swear a dozen constrictors had been squeezing his guts. I saw his face and believe me it wasn't pretty."

Rod's voice was husky. "You mean the old lady set those snakes on him?"

Basket Case shook his head. "Babe Flynn kept her snakes locked up tight as a drum in her own trailer. She swore up and down nobody'd even come near them the night before, let alone turned 'em loose. But Richey was dead. And that's what I mean about the double whammy."

"Look." Rod was talking to Basket Case, but he wanted to hear it himself, too. "Madame Sylvia's just another mitt reader, peddling phoney fortunes to the suckers. All this marlarkey about gypsy curses—"

"Okay, okay." Basket Case shrugged. "But if I were you I'd cut out of here, fast. And until I did, I wouldn't let that old lady catch me standing in front of a mirror."

"Thanks for the tip," Rod said.

As he walked away, Basket Case called after him. "See you at the funeral."

But Rod didn't go to the funeral.

It wasn't as if he was afraid or anything; he just didn't like the idea of standing at Cora's grave with everybody looking at him as if they knew. And they damned well did by now, all of them. Maybe it would be smart to ease out of here like Basket Case said, but not now.

Not until he could pay off what he owed to Donahue. For the next three weeks he'd just sweat it out.

Meanwhile, he'd watch his step. Not that he believed that crazy story about the double whammy—Basket Case was just putting him on, it had to be a gag. But it never hurt to be careful.

Which is why Rod shaved for the evening performance that afternoon. He knew the old lady was at the funeral like everybody else; she wouldn't be creeping up behind him to capture his soul from his reflection in the mirror—

Damned right, she wouldn't!

Rod made a face at himself in the glass. What the hell was the matter with him, anyway? He didn't huy that hit about the curse.

But there *was* something wrong. Because for a moment when Rod looked into the mirror he didn't see himself. Instead he was staring into a black, grinning face, with bloodshot, red-rimmed eyes and a twisted mouth opening to show the yellow fangs—

Rod hlinked and the face went away; it was his own reflection peering back at him. But his hand was shaking so that he had to put the razor down.

His hand was still shaking when he reached for the bottle on the top shelf, and he must have spilled more of the whiskey than he managed to get into the glass. So he took a slug straight from the bottle instead. And then another, until his hands were steady again. Good for the nerves, a little snort now and then. Only you had to watch that stuff, not let it run away with you. Because if you didn't pretty soon you got hooked and some day before you knew what was happening, you wound up in the wooly wig and the blackface, down there in the pit waiting for the white chicken—

The hell with that noise. It wasn't going to happen. Just a couple of weeks and he'd be out of here, no more carny, nothing to hug him ever again. All he had to do now was keep his cool and watch his step.

Rod watched his step very carefully that evening when he walked up to the bally platform and adjusted his mike for the pitch. Standing before the bloody banners he felt good, very good indeed, and the couple of extra belts he'd taken from the bottle just for luck seemed to have unwound that ball of fear inside his head. It was easy to make his pitch about the Strange People—"All there on the inside, folks, on the *inside*"—and watch the marks flocking around down below. The marks—they were the real freaks, only they didn't know it. Shelling out their dough to gawk at poor devils like Basket Case, then paying extra for the *Special Added Attraction, Adults Only*, in the canvas pit behind the ten-in-one tent. What kind of a pervert would pay money to see a geek? What was the matter with people like that?

And what was the matter with him? Standing there beside the pit, holding the hurlap hag and feeling the chicken fluttering helplessly inside, Rod felt the fear returning to flutter within himself. He didn't want to look down into the pit and see the geek crouching there, growling and grimmacing like a real wild man. So he looked at the crowd instead, and that was better. The crowd didn't know he was afraid. Nobody knew he was spooked, let alone what scared him.

Rod talked to the crowd, building his pitch, and his hands started to fumble with the cord around the neck of the hurlap hag, getting ready to open it and dump the chicken into the pit.

And that's when he saw *her*.

She was standing over to one side, right up against the edge of the canvas; just a little old woman dressed in black, with a black shawl draped over her head. Her face was pinched, her skin was brown and leathery, wrinkled into a permanent scowl. An old lady, nobody gave her a second glance, but Rod saw her.

And she saw him.

Funny, he'd never noticed Madame Sylvia's eyes before. They were big and brown and staring—they stared right at him now, stared right *through* him.

Rod wrenched his gaze away, forced his fingers to open the sack. All the while, mechanically, he was talking, finishing the buildup as he reached for the chicken, pulled it out, flung the clucking creature down to that other creature in the pit—the creature that growled and grabbed and oh my God it was biting now—

He couldn't watch and he had to turn his head away, seeing the crowd again as they shrieked and shuddered, getting their kicks. And *she* was still standing there, still staring at him.

But now her clawlike hand moved, moved over the rim of the canvas to extend a pointing forefinger. Rod knew what she was pointing at; she was pointing at the geek-pit. And that wrinkled face *could* change its expression, because she was smiling now.

Rod turned and groped his way out into the night.

She knew.

Not just about him and Cora, but about everything. Those eyes that stared at him and through him had also stared *inside* him—stared inside and found his fear. That's why she'd pointed and smiled; she knew what he was afraid of.

The Midway lights were bright, but it was darker behind the canvas sidewalls

except where a patch of moonlight shone on the big water-barrel setting next to the cook-tent.

Rod's face was damp with sweat; he headed for the barrel and soaked his handkerchief in the water to wipe his forehead. Time for another pitch pretty soon, and the next show. He had to pull himself together.

The cool water helped to clear his head, and he dipped his handkerchief again. That was better. No sense flipping just because a nutty old dame gave him a dirty look. This business about gypsies and the evil eye and the double whammy was all a crock. And even if there *was* something to it, he wouldn't let her get to him. He wasn't about to stand in front of any mirrors—

Then he glanced down at the water in the barrel, saw his features reflected in the moonlight shining there. And he saw her face, standing right behind him. Her eyes were staring and her mouth was mumbling, and now her hands were coming up, making passes in the air. Making passes like an old witch, she was going to turn him into a geek with the double whammy—

Rod turned, and that's the last thing he remembered. He must have passed out, fallen, because when he came to he was still on the ground.

But the ground was somehow different than the earth outside the tent; it was covered with sawdust. And the light was stronger, it was shining straight down between the canvas walls of the pit.

He was in the pit.

The realization came, and Rod looked up, knowing it was too late, she'd caught him, he was in the geek's body now.

But something else was wrong, too; the pit was deeper, the canvas walls much higher. Everything seemed bigger, even

(continued on page 31)

The Lookoutworld was an alien ship—and beset with an alien malady. The problem was to salvage her and get her home—while she was still all in one piece. The task had killed her previous crew . . .

THE GOOD SHIP LOOKOUTWORLD

DEAN R. KOONTZ

illustrated by RALPH REESE

I WAS OUT ON Omega City, the last pleasure platform toward galactic core, sitting in one of her hundred and twenty bars when he heaved himself over the lip of the glass cage wall and into the arena with the Eye. Silence was thick as syrup in that room.

It was a particularly vicious Eye; the last fight had lasted only four minutes. The second Eye was a blood-matted hulk, quivering with post-mortem muscle spasms in the simu-sawdust of the cage floor. The victorious beast had not suffered a single scratch, cut or bruise. It paraded about the cage, blue waves of lubricant washing its lidless orb, clacking its razor teeth together in a mouth that occupied a third of its skull. The small chest crashed up and down with heavy breathing, and the long, three-elbowed arms swung loose like those of an ape, trailing the sharp-clawed fingers in the plastic shavings.

When the spacer went into the cage, the Eye sort of sighed, resigned to another hassle—yet looking forward to it. It slavered and circled to the right.

Still not a sound. The patrons were sure

it was Death in all His glory.

The Eye was a quick killer. Everyone was glad, at least, for that much. A long battle between man and Eye was not the kind of sadistic kick they were looking forward. Yet no one ventured to help the caged man; an Eye had been known to kill four men pitted against it at the same time.

I swallowed the rest of my drink and edged forward on my chair. I was not adverse to watching a murder—if the victim were insane enough to offer himself as a sacrifice.

The Eye swiped at the man, missed. The challenger had danced nimbly away from its claws. The Eye lunged, struck out! But the man was on the other side of the cage, standing on his toes, his arms locked above his head in a graceful arc—smiling.

It is difficult to say who was more confused at that point—the Eye or the crowd. The crowd recovered more quickly. The silence was suddenly shattered with wild cheering and laughter.

The Eye ambled across the cage, more deliberate in its actions, yet still sure of itself. It was bouncing up and down on

the balls of its feet, jerking its head back and forth. Anyone who follows the fights knows what this means: pounce. Suddenly decisive, the Eye leaped, sailing toward the dark man with feet and arms extended, claws glistening. But the spacer was faster. He dropped to the floor, rolled under the Eye, lifted airy onto his toes, and watched the beast crash into the plexi-glass wall and slide to the floor, stunned.

The cheering was so intense that my glass was rattling on the flimsy table. Part of the noise was my own screaming.

The challenger acted quickly, drawing a twin-bladed knife. He leaped through the air, parodying the Eye's leap, landed upon the beast's back, and drove the weapon deep into the base of the ungainly skull. Death was there, but in behalf of an unexpected party.

The challenger climbed out of the cage, stood on the lip. He waved for silence and looked down at the crowd with those coal eyes. Sneering, he said, "I promise a month's wages of the highest order and a year's contract for work to anyone who can beat me in the ring."

Silence again.

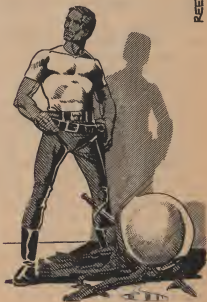
He said some more, mostly teasing jibes, but he wasn't talking to anyone, for there was no one, at that moment, willing to take him up on it. His idea, however, was obvious. A man had to have respect for his captain—therefore this challenger had beaten the Eye. Yet the man he wanted to be unafraid of everything—including a man who had killed an Eye.

No one, like I said, was moving. Except me.

I don't know just why. Perhaps it was being so damned flat broke, relying on other spacers to buy me liquor. And perhaps it was the liquor itself. The other



REESE



spacers had been particularly generous that night. Anyway, I found myself moving toward the plexi-glass cage, weaving slightly, with every two-eyed human, three-eyed Jackster, and no-eyed Prinsoid following me with complete attention. And awe.

I climbed the ladder to the top while the dancer climbed back down into the cage. For one moment, poised on the brink of the glass wall, I wondered what the Hell I was doing. But with one hundred and fifty spacers watching you, you can't hack down. The Prinsoids would have torn me apart. They have a strong code of honor that would not have tolerated cowardice once I had committed myself. Even without eyes, they managed to find a coward no matter where he hides.

I couldn't hear the silence for the pounding of blood in my ears and my Id screaming: *You'll hurt your goddam self!*

We had removed all weapons. He was facing me, his hair and eyes black, his face thin and fine-honed. He bowed very politely. He was lanky, and the bow was that much more impressive. I bowed in turn, drawing some laughter for the effort. I wasn't trying to be a comedian. I felt like I *had* to bow. He inspired mannerly conduct. When I was upright again, he smiled, pirouetted, and struck me with a foot so fast that I didn't really know what had hit me. But I knew where! My chest felt caved-in. I was flat on my back, looking up at the ceiling lights, and gasping for breath.

He was fluttering about gracefully, bending and twisting. He spun over to me just about when my lungs had recovered and I was trying to get up. I could see his foot inching up for the next blow as he spun . . .

I moved first. With a thrust that sent fire through my chest, I grabbed that foot, twisted, and sent him crashing down to the floor with me.

But he even fell gracefully. And he was on his feet, smiling and spinning before the audience had time to realize he had been down. Now, dancers had always seemed prissy to me. I had never been impressed by the long history of the male hallet star or by the work they put into it. Now I was. I moved away from him as he advanced, dipping and swaying. I suffered the slaps of his hands. I just wanted to avoid those feet.

After a while of chasing about the cage, he stopped, put his hands on his hips. "You just going to stand there?" He had seen the Prinsoids getting restless over my hesitation. So had I.

Stopped in his dance, he was like Samson with a haircut. Some of the magical aura was gone. I lunged. He opened his coal eyes in surprise, tried to start prancing again, but was too late. I locked arms about his waist and pulled him down. I twisted him onto his back, slid an arm across his neck, pressed. He was struggling bringing his feet around in impossible arcs and smashing my head and shoulders with them. I pressed harder. When I felt the clutching power begin to leave his fingers, I let go and dropped onto his shoulders.

The cheers from the patrons were wild and high-pitched. Three different races had their faces—and what passed for faces—pressed to the glass cage walls. I stood, grinned bravely, and passed out.

II

I WOKE TO THE smell of blood. Eye blood. Yech!

There were several faces hovering over me. When the mists cleared sufficiently, I

could see one of the faces was the dancer's. He smiled, revealing white, even teeth. "You won," he said, still awed.

I croaked, coughed. "I'm not so sure."

He pulled back the collar of his jumpsuit to reveal a black bruise spreading down from his neck and across his chest. "You could have killed me."

"That would have taken another ounce of effort, and another ounce of effort would have killed me."

He helped me to my feet, led me out of the cage. "We can't stay here," he shouted into my ear.

True enough. There were so many men waiting to pat us on the back and buy us drinks that just walking became a major task. Eventually, we reached the street, hoarded a sidewalk, and cruised out towards the docks with the wind from the tunnel air-conditioners blowing in our faces. We couldn't talk until we got off, and even then the dancer was in too big a hurry to get somewhere.

The somewhere was a Jackster hyperdrive ship. It was horrible. It had seen better days—but by the looks of it, those days were not just old, but ancient. In fact, I wondered if this tattered wreck were not a Jackster prototype. It was mostly a cargo ship. The only living space onboard was the main control chamber. It was extra large, fitted with two bunks, two control seats of well-padded, hand-tooled leather, two-duplicate control consoles, an overhead remote viewscreen a yard by a yard, a storage freezer bolted to one wall, and a weapons and suit rack.

"Sit down," he said, lifting the freezer lid and extracting two frosted glasses. "A drink?"

"Fine."

"Your name. I don't even know your name." He handed me a machine-made

drink and sat down on the first bunk.

"Damon Coltrain."

"Mine is Petro Cahelroni of the House of Cahelroni of Los Delos."

"The Los Delos?"

"The."

Los Delos was a planet for the rich. It was so perfect and beautiful in every detail that the land there went for thousands of credits an acre.

"We have forty thousand acres there," he said, sipping his drink, expecting my surprise.

"Then what the devil are you doing in this tub?"

"Wait. First you must agree to work for me at—say five thousand credits a week until the mission is accomplished."

I choked on my drink.

"I trust that means yes?"

I wiped tears from my eyes. "Yes." I get emotional over money.

"I bought this tub from an old salvager who had struck it lucky and was willing to shuck it cheap before getting a new one. I had the command room expanded a good bit. I'm a claustrophobe, and I need as much room as possible in a spaceship. I am presently inhabiting this old tank because we are going to junk it somewhere this side of *epsilon* Sagittarii."

"That's nearly 9,000 light years from Earth!"

"Not everyone measures from Earth anymore." As I said before, he was cool.

"Still, that's a long ride. The edge of Known Space. You pushing for hero status?"

"Do you want to hack out? I hope not. I went through all that in the bar just to find a man who wouldn't mind facing it."

"Sagittarii is 60,000 times brighter than Sol. Is the ship going to stand up to that?"

"Damon, nothing could get through

this hull. It may be old, but it's full-shielded and sturdy."

"Okay, I'll stay. I don't mind a bit of adventure, but pure foolishness doesn't really appeal to me."

He got two more drinks. "We're going to junk it because there is another ship out there which we're salvaging and riding home in."

"Out there?" I couldn't imagine any ship but ours cruising through the brightness around *ypsilon* Sagittari, asking to be ashed.

"My salvage snoopers picked her up a week ago. I had some idea she might be drifting toward galactic core; this part of space had been thoroughly searched without luck."

"But why, with your wealth, are you salvaging?"

He sighed. "My family lost great sums of money when the Jackster's home world was lost when their sun went nova. There had been warning enough to move ninety-five percent of the population and relocate them, but only people could be moved. Factories, hotels, everything else remained. My family's greatest holdings were lost, blasted to dust in microseconds."

I squirmed in my seat. "But you had your 40,000 acres—"

"With taxes due. The price of land on Los Delos is matched only by the annual taxes on those lands. They fell due shortly after the destruction of the Jackster home world."

"And your family—"

"Couldn't pay."

"But why not sell part of the land to raise the money?"

"It is law on Los Delos that land with taxes due cannot be sold. If the tax mounts for ten years and is not paid in full by that time, the land reverts to the

government. It is a simple method of insuring a small but constant turnover on the land."

"How many years have elapsed?"

"Four. But the interests mount quickly. The sooner I pay, the better."

"But what can you expect to gain from one salvage job that could possibly make even a dent in that kind of a debt?"

"The ship is the *Lookoutworld*."

"You're sure?" I was suddenly stone sober.

"Positive."

"Then you might want to pay your taxes and buy *all* of Los Delos!"

"I just might," he said.

And he just possibly could . . .

III

THE LOOKOUTWORLD WAS the last ship built by the Bulbheads. They were the fourth sentient race in the galaxy—humanoid, five feet tall on the average, hairless, possessed of domed heads, large blue eyes, and laughing porpoise mouths. They were the carnie men of the galaxy. Circuses. Amusements. Games. The Bulbheads were purveyors of fun and entertainment, carrying their inventive devices wherever a laugh was needed. They were gay by nature, creative, highly intelligent, and friendly to a fault. They had never engaged in a war.

Everyone liked the Bulbheads.

Everyone was horrified when their race was wiped out.

They had been the beings that had built the first pleasure platforms. They had developed the brain stimulator to create instant pleasure. And they had, reportedly, just developed the creative robots that could dream up complex

amusements even the Bulbheads could not conceive of. But their lives had been snuffed out before their latest efforts could be viewed.

Their death had not been rapid. Every laboratory in the civilized worlds, I think, was pressed into service to find a cure for the disease that plagued the Bulbheads. But there was no way of telling on what world the disease had been picked up or what it had mutated into within their bodies. No one could stop it.

A year and a month from the date of the first case, the fourth sentient race in the galaxy was rotting away in its own alien fashion—i.e., strung up on funeral platforms all over their three inhabited globes. Dead to the last.

That had been thirty years before. Now, Petro Cabelroni had found their last and reportedly hest ship which had been unaccountably lost after it had left the homeworld, a month before the first plague case. It was gone without trace. Government and private industry searched for three years, but in time the hunt was abandoned.

Abandoned by everyone, apparently, but Petro.

"We hyperspace in ten minutes," he said, looking over the control console.

We were seven hours out from Omega, turned toward the white gaseous haze that obscured all things near the core. That core was 25,000 LY's away; we were only going out another five thousand. It wasn't much. I shouldn't have been worried. I was.

"Right." I connected the shoulder harness and seat belts that would hold me down.

We jumped.

It would take seven days to reach our destination, what with popping in and

out of hyperspace to take readings on the rohot salvage snoopers that were clinging determinedly to the *Lookoutworld*. Seven days with little or nothing to do. We got to know each other rather well. I spilled all I thought was interesting about my ten years of perilous adventures as a spacer. Seven days, and he told me about himself too. He had gone to school (all three levels and nine years of University) on Vultan, that heavily clouded planet that circles dangerously close to Sirius, the luminous giant eyeball that can penetrate even the miles of clouds around Vultan to give a form of daylight to the land below. He had been trained in all the sciences and humanities. But he had specialized in dancing. Thus, the fancy footwork.

He had seen his family wealthy—and poor.

He had seen it scorned by friends who turned away in time of need; he had seen hypocrisy in all persons his father held close. He had seen his father die friendless, save for his family.

He was determined to get revenge. But he needed money first.

Lookoutworld.

We popped out on this side of Sagittarii, keeping our distance no matter how fool-proof the hull might be. With the screen shaded and shielded to block out the worst of the brilliance, we searched space for the reflection of the *Lookoutworld*. Our radar had picked her up just about where the robosnoops had reported her, but the eye is still the most reassuring method of detection—even when it is not needed.

"There," I said, pointing to the left corner of the screen.

Pete changd camera angles and enlarged that quadrant. It was the ship, huge and brightly shining. She was larger

than any Bulbhead vessel I had ever seen, though constructed like all the others: a bunch of ping pong balls glued together. There were fourteen spheres in this one, banging in a cluster. The Bulbheads built spheres of several levels then attached them together, making it possible to seal the remainder of a ship off if one chamber were damaged. Although this was not their main reason for ping pong ball ships. They built them chiefly because they liked the looks of them. That's a Bulbhead for you.

"The fusion engine will get us there fast if you let it gobble." Gobbling hydrogen for use in the drive system greatly increases speed, though it does wear an engine down.

"We take it slow," he said.

"But if we're going back in that one—"

"It might not move; it might be a dead ship."

I had never been a salvager, and the thought had just never occurred to me.

We moved in slow. Five hours later, we had latched onto the top sphere of the *Lookoutworld*, directly over her entry portal. Oxy-nitrogen poured in our own exit-entry vestibule after we had established an air-tight seal. We stepped in and found the entry to the Bulbhead vessel had opened automatically and was filled with a breathable atmosphere. We went in.

The inside was normal for a Bulbhead vessel: sumptuous. The walls and floor were covered with jaca fur, black and thick. Natural leather couches dotted the floor, bright orange and over-stuffed. Next to every couch stood a reading rack and sensu-tape dispenser.

"The control center will be on the belly of the ship," Pete said.

"Weapons?" I asked, hefting my gun.

"The place looks peaceful enough.

Carry it anyhow."

We preferred walking to riding down, for there was much to see—too much for a dropshaft. From top to bottom, the ship measured four miles, slightly longer side to side. In that space, we passed hot water swimming pools with jewel-glass floors, cold water swimming pools with lightening flashes of every chromatic dispersion rippling through the volcanic glass they were chiseled out of. We passed toto-experience movie rooms where the screen wrapped around all four walls and the super-sensitive "skin" of the seats treated all your senses to illusion.

"It looks so peaceful and happy," I said. "Too bad it never got to see its first passengers."

"It will yet."

We descended the last flight of crystal stairs and came up before the off-limits sign on the control room door:

... ..

KEEP OUT/ GRAS TA/ COS/ DEG
FREMIN STRAFIN

It was designed to be read by robots as well as earthmen, Prinsoids, Jacksters, and Bulbheads.

Pete kicked on the door. It creaked, hummed, opened. There were seven bodies on the floor. Seven skeletons, really. Six against one wall, one against the other. They were all missing their skulls . . .

IV

THE OXY-MAKER had kept the atmosphere ripe for rotting. Ugly patches of gray-green mold grew over the deck where there had once been flesh to feed it. There would be a definite odor if we took our helmets off. But we wouldn't take them off; we were playing this one hundred percent safe.

"Wasn't anything like a virus or gas," Pete said, kneeling beside the lone corpse. "It looks like this fellow lined the other six up, burned their heads off with a vibra-pistol, then took his own life in the same manner."

"That doesn't make sense. The Bulbheads were free of those mental illnesses—incapable of murder, suicide—"

"I know." He was looking over the controls.

"Except for mercy killing. They believed in that."

He was opening drawers, searching wall compartments.

I was talking to myself as much as to him. "But what the hell is there here that would make a Bulbhead want to kill himself? It couldn't have been the disease. They left their planet before it broke out."

He turned around. "There's no log."

"Of course not. Bulbheads didn't go in for annoying details like logtapes. That was too boring for them. They turned in the plotogram's self-tapes, and that was all the law required of them."

He dropped into the control chair. "Let's see if she functions."

I slumped next to him, strapped in. There was a primary hum as the systems came to life. The console board lighted up with eighty-four idiot bulbs—six for every sphere. Nothing was burned out on any of them. The fusion driv was still operable. Spaceworthy as all Hell.

"You're a billionaire," I said.

"Not yet."

"Don't be paranoid."

"We have to be."

I glanced back at the seven skeletons. The *headless* skeletons. "Yeah," I said, "I guess we do."

Pete fed the plotogram our desired

destination—Omega—and we waited for a time estimate. It popped up finally in green letters on the shipbrain-to-crew communications board: 8DA/12HR 13MIN. Eight and a half days. It would take longer going home, for a Bulbhead ship cannot stand as many LY's per hour as a Jackster ship. The structural oddity slows it. We had come in a barracuda, and we were going home in a sponge.

We detached the junkboat from the larger ship, strapped in securely, ran a check of systems, and made the jump, letting the plotogram guide us through the starways back toward well-traveled space.

With seven dead men on the floor . . .

With seven skeletons . . .

I wondered how long it would be before something happened.

It was about seven minutes.

V

SIX LIGHTS WENT OUT.

Seven minutes into hyperspace, six lights popped out, all of them representing the condition of various instruments in the top-most sphere where we had made our entrance earlier.

"Ho!" I shouted.

But he had already seen and was bringing the ship around to popping back into normal space. In hyperspace, one can see nothing through the viewscreen but a blank, gray nothingness. Once in normal space, we turned on the hull scanners on the fourteenth sphere. They were not operable either.

"I'll go," Pete said, struggling out of his straps.

"I think we had both better go."

Again, our eyes fell to the silent bones.

"Okay. But don't be so goddamn morbid. It's bad enough."

We used the elevator up.

I don't think we said anything on the way.

Stepping into the sphere directly under the fourteenth, Pete dialed a series of numbers to the left of the doorway. Probability ran high that the top sphere had been struck by a meteorite. If that were the case, there would be a vacuum on the other side of that door. We were depressurizing this chamber.

We opened the door—stepped out. And it was a vacuum. That and nothing more. No trace of a fourteenth sphere; no clue that there might ever have been a fourteenth sphere. Nothing.

"What the hell—" Pete started, staring at the stars. "Where is the last chamber?"

"Disintegrated?" I asked, feeling at once foolish.

"How could an entire hull, all framework, all contents be disintegrated without a trace in a few seconds without even scorching the rest of the ship?"

"Perhaps we've found the fifth sentient race," I said, searching the star-speckled black velvet for the outline of another ship.

"But where are they now?"

"Still in hyperspace?" I asked.

"Then they're light years away by now." He sounded as if—had they been nearby—we would go out and skin them alive. I was not feeling so brave. I had signed on for salvage work and had built up the proper amount of courage for that. But when the ship began dissolving around me . . .

"What now?"

"Onward, of course," he said, he said, he did. He stepped back into the thirteenth sphere. "This ship is still

worth as much as all of Los Delos. I *will* get her back!"

Seven hours later, buzzing through hyperspace, we were saying won't-this-be-something-to-tell-our-grandchildren-about-and-this-is-surely-something-the-goddamn-silly-scientists-are-going-to-have-a-hard-time-explaining kind of things when suddenly twelve lights on the board went out: *Blink!*

Two of the top spheres.

Suddenly, even five thou-credits a day wasn't enough. Not nearly.

We popped out of hyperspace, decelerated again. Pete turned on the hull cameras and angled them about, trying to catch part of the areas with the surrounding cameras, but that part was totally vacant. Gone. *Poof!*

He gritted his teeth. "Bloody bastards!"

As alone as we were, I wondered to whom he could be referring. Then I wondered if he was not connecting this latest misfortune (too mild a word!) with those of his earlier life. Was he blaming his father's fair-weather friends for his attempt to stop his rise back to wealth? The last thing I needed was to see the captain come down with a severe case of paranoia—especially since he was already a claustrophobe in a dissolving ship . . .

We scanned every inch of surrounding space. There was not another ship or any sign of freespace dwellers who might have swum in sans ship to do the dirty work.

"Suppose," I said, shivering with the thought, "we *have* found the fifth intelligent race in the galaxy—and it lives in hyperspace."

He looked up, his face white.

"We know that when we reach the speed of light, for an instant, we turn into light ourselves; but upon surpassing the

speed of light, we find ourselves in hyperspace. What if it is another plane of existence, a warped plane—or dimension? That would explain why they are never around when we pop back into normal space."

"Scientifically impossible."

"Just the same, let's keep the scanners on while in hyperspace."

He hesitated. The small view of absolute nothingness that the viewscreen would give us was enough to turn a claustrophobe into a raving maniac. But he agreed.

Five hours later, another sphere hlinked into vacuum. The moment the six lights were lost, we scanned hyperspace. But there was nothing but grayness.

"That blows that theory," he said, settling back from the edge of his chair—though not the whole way back.

"So now what? Pop out and inspect the damage?"

"No. Look, Damon, we're going to have to stay in hyperspace and try to make it back before the whole ship is eaten away around us. We could never make it in normal space; we would die of old age before we got halfway there."

"We could call Omega and have a ship sent out to meet us."

"The last sphere that went," he said rather dismally, "contained our transmitters."

"This is going to be one Helluva ride," I said.

As if in answer, eighteen more lights blinked out.

"One Helluva ride."

The disease was eating its way down through the cluster. The control cabin, by the looks of things, would be last. I thought of it in the terms of metal leprosy. But that didn't help.

It had been three hours since the last loss, and we were getting our hearts pushed back down in our throats. Eight chambers remained. "I've been wondering," Pete said, "if this is what happened to the Bulbheads."

"What?"

"Perhaps they committed suicide gladly, rather than dissolve into whatever the ship was dissolving into."

"Impossible. There were fourteen spheres when we came on, remember. They had nothing to worry about."

"But," he said, turning to look at me for the first time in an hour of conversation, "suppose there were fifty spheres when they started out."

"Fifty?"

"Or sixty, a hundred—even a million. The number is not important. Remember that this was a robot-built and designed ship. It was announced to the galaxy as the greatest funliner in history. Perhaps it was much larger than fourteen spheres."

"And the Bulbheads, when three fourths of their ship had disappeared, decided they had better act fast and commit suicide rather than to go down to Death in some unknown fashion."

"Exactly."

We didn't talk again for quite a while.

Four days and ten hours out from Omega, we felt giddy. We had even taken our helmets off and found the air was not so noxious as we had imagined it. We were still with eight chambers, and a great deal of time had passed since the last attack. It seemed as if a limit had been reached. We even ventured into the next chamber to sit through a toto-experience movie, though this we did only one at a time. We were still on edge, despite the bright outlook.

I had chosen a toto-tape directly after

lunch, sat down for an hour of entertainment, an hour of entertainment so real that every part of my brain was fooled . . .

. . . And a rude hand was shaking me loose of the electrodes, bringing me back into the reality of the *Lookoutworld*.

"Wha—"

"Thought you'd like to know," Petro said, his voice very thin, "that we lost two more."

Back in the command center, I looked at the idiot board. More than fifty percent of it was dark.

"More than four days to go," Petro said, his eyes shifting from one object to another like small insects in a forest of candle flames—as if he were expecting each thing to vanish as he watched it. "We won't make it."

I talked to console myself as well as him. "There isn't a pattern to it. Our end isn't predestined. It doesn't, for instance, eat up one sphere every three hours. There were days without incident. Perhaps we still have a good chance of making it."

But he didn't look like he wanted to make it. He looked like he wanted to slump down in some corner and call it quits. There were dark circles under his eyes despite the sleeploz he had taken off-shift. Now, he took more pills, layed down, and slept, tossing and turning a bit. I sat by the board, waiting . . .

Sitting there, I had time to think about the Bulbheads. Fun-loving, free, extinct. Was that the fate of a race that meant only to do good? Was that, in fact, the fate of any and all races? Would there, one day, be no intelligent race alive in the galaxy? Was the galaxy itself devouring us all, spreading out from the core to stamp us with its rubber print of death? To accentuate the gloom that had

descended on me, two more sets of lights went out.

We were now a four-chambered vessel four days from touchdown.

Somehow, it didn't excite me. The novelty had worn off under the strain. There was something so inevitable about it that there was no use turning on the scanners for a look. There would be grayness.

Perhaps the Bulbhead crew had the right idea. Before you were pushed into one, tiny, fear-filled cabin, blow your head off. Beat Death at the game. When Pete woke, I would suggest we keep a loaded gun ready for when the last sphere outside our own was gone. I never was one for giving up, but there was only so much of the Unknown I was willing to face.

Part of that was Space Career Center's fault. We were trained to face every danger in the area called Known Space, but we were also drilled with another order: "Don't face what you don't understand. If you're never seen it before, run!" It was a good rule to follow in a galaxy that held every kind of exotic death one could imagine. It stuck with me. I put my vibra-pistol on the console where it would be within easy reach.

In the next six hours, nothing happened. When Pete woke, I told him we were down to four. He became so hysterical, screaming about too little elbow room and not enough space to breathe, that I had to thumb the pistol to STUN and let him have it. He collapsed like a sack of wet feathers.

When he woke the next time, he was still numbed a bit and not as excited. But it would come back—the bysteria. I told him my plan for suicide if we were narrowed down to one cabin. He agreed. Almost too readily. He took over the controls. Just as he sat down, we became

a two-chambered ship.

I felt my gorge rising.

"This is not a goddamned bit entertaining!" he shouted, losing control. "You're a lousy amusement ship, not a death trap!"

Bang! Snap! Sounds of a brain shifting out of apathy.

I fell over the chair getting up, slamming my hip hard. The mists in my mind had cleared suddenly, and action seemed essential, movement mandatory. Little bits and pieces of things were falling together, things noticed and remarked upon since we had entered the ship, but things that had not fitted together until now. The answer was deceptively simple!

Then I noticed Pete had picked up the gun, had thumbed the dial to KILL . . .

VI

I BROUGHT A karate chop down on his hand, knocked the gun loose, watched it clatter across the floor and bang into the wall.

"What are you doing?" he shouted, rubbing his wrist and eyeing the fallen weapon.

I didn't relish a shipboard fight with the dancer again, especially in his present state of over-excitement. "Wait! I've figured it out! I know why the ship is dissolving around us!"

He stopped short of lunging for me.

"You said it yourself, Pete."

He looked at me as if he were ready to leap again.

"Entertainment. The spheres aren't really dissolving at all. They're still there."

"The Hell they are!"

"Look, Pete, you know what the toto-

experience movies are like. Suppose this entire ship is a toto-experience movie? Suppose you enter this—theater, and are swamped with illusions."

His lips calmed, but his eyes still flitted about.

"The spheres are still out there, but the ship soaks our senses with the illusion of a disintegrating ship, a toto-experience of sight, sound, taste, and smell. This is one of the oldest entertainments: the horror story, the terror tale."

He eased a bit more. "But why didn't the Bulbheads know that?"

"The ship was built by creative robots," I said. "The Bulbheads might know a lot of what it could do, but they evidently didn't know about the Big Trick, the dissolving bit. The whole thing could have taken them by surprise as it did us. They invented robots just a bit too creative.

"It's a nice theory, but—"

"With facts to back it up," I interrupted quickly. I was convincing myself, at least, and I didn't want to be refuted until I had my full say. "If the spheres had really been dissolving, we would have been lessening our mass, thus increasing our speed, allowing this fragile vessel to make the trip home faster. But we aren't moving any faster. We are still as big as we were, whether we can see that fact or not."

He was still nervous, but he was eager to have an answer. "Okay, I'll buy that. But when the Hell does this illusion end?"

We had the answer to that as everything about us vanished and left us hanging in hyperspace. We were breathing fine, which meant the ship was still around us. But all we could see was grayness. All grayness.

Pete screamed. He had been thrust into

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In which David Bunch tells another personal parable about winning and losing, pleasure and pain . .

LEARNING IT AT MISS REJOYY'S

DAVID R. BUNCH

IT WASN'T the kind of day you would expect to select. Not if you were going somewhere to see horrors. There were no clouds and gloom, no undue darkness umbrellaed down from the big canopy that roofs our prison where we die, and sometimes live! Nor was there in the heavens that day any sign to portend great revelations of wonder either. But I was *alive* that day, in the game-spring of my youth, full-blooded up with tingling hurry-now and on my way with impatient let-us-see-now, hope beating the thoughts behind my eyeballs down. I was on my way at last to the place of Miss Rejoyy.

On an April day, in the game-spring of my youth, with the sun a bland fine little fireball up there rolling the good warmth down, to be at last in range of Miss Rejoyy! —I could see her place in a valley, about five miles away. It was no castle of splendor that overwhelmed the gaze from five miles away. Nor would it be a tall palace at one mile or closer, that I knew. There were no towers and spinning lights flung up at impossible heaven in a cheap pathetic vain try at gaining above our rightful base. Nor did decorative bric-a-brac make attempt at softening steel, glass and masonry that was the huge sprawling one-story stark palace of Miss Rejoyy. It was altogether a modern building, I knew from the stories, yet a

structure of splendors and wonders, and maybe death, inside. Yes, I knew from the tales what kind of place Miss Rejoyy ran and something of what she did there. Yes!

I walked on down. I could not stay away! All my years up to now were pointed toward this meeting, were but a getting ready for this confrontation . . .

"Miss Rejoyy!"—I looked into her blue blue eyes; I looked at her lips and that soft white thrust of neck; I looked at her nose and ears; I looked at her legs; I looked—*love!* "You do it to find out in the world where pain is and pleasure and how it is so that you may best see how that no pain ever comes—"

She laughed as she swept a panel back in the wall. Her skirt seemed a pale blue mist from purple lights as she danced before my eyes. And there was a brief glimpse, through some curtains of gauzy lace, of things I had come to see, the horrors and the wonders I had dreamed of as a small child. The years fell away; the long tedious miles traveled of childhood to get here were going to be worth it all, I felt sure.

She allowed me to gorge my eyes for only an instant, then she led me away. She took me into a small room off a wide lavender hall. We sat down in two plush purple chairs, and I was surprised to see how this small room with its lavender appointments was overcrowded with very

vigorous looking green plants, some in ornate pots on the floor, some apparently based above our ceiling and just visiting this room through special holes. My curiosity made me glance furtively about to see if each was being monitored for pleasure or for pain. Yes, I had heard the stories about how everything at Miss Rejoyy's place was pain-pleasure monitored. "A leaf twisted hard on a sunflower, say, shows about as much hurt, say, as a four-year-old boy with two broken thumbs," they used to say, partly in jest, down in my part of the world. —Because of certain attachments that I noted, I could not help but believe that each plant here was metered. But the meters, if they existed in this room, must be cleverly concealed.

I guess she read my brains. "No pain-pleasure meters in here," she said. "Not that they don't exist for this stuff. Everything alive is either pain or pleasure, as you know. That's all there is to it. They're on the roof for these plants. —But let's talk about you. Why have you come? What are your intentions? Do you wish to compete?"

"I've come here because you're you," I said. "When I was just a very young child, I heard of you, Miss Rejoyy, from my father. He had been here—once. And—well, it must have made quite an impression on him. Because when he told about it—one time when he was drunk, I'm sure—I didn't want to see carnivals or circuses, or eat chocolate cake, or have a new hike, or pull girls' hair, or anything. I just wanted to come to your place, Miss Rejoyy. But you're young! How do you stay so young? My father's old, oh, very. In fact, he's so old he's been sleeping now almost a year out in one of those little lawns. You know, the permanent lawn party! *My father's dead!*"

Miss Rejoyy seemed genuinely sorry about my father's current state. Then she gave a sharp little laugh, and I saw how her full red lips could pull back from the beautiful tiny white knives that her teeth were. "Your father probably knew Mama. Of course Mama's very old now too. You may meet her wandering around here in a kind of daze in one of the halls. No one pays any attention to Mama, though. Mama's had it! And I inherited the business.

"Now, about your intentions. Do you wish to try for the Grand Prize? Are you just here to sightsee? Are you one of the curious millions?"

"What is the Grand Prize?" I asked, naturally.

Her lashes beat up and down. She turned in her chair until I could see most of her beautiful nyloned legs. She smiled the smile that could launch a million desires of lust. Then she stretched and yawned and thrust her pointy brassiere out at me until my heart beat like a bird trying to get out of an iron box. "Me!" she said, "I'm the Grand Prize. At the end of it all we go into a little room. Not a crowded one like this though, and maybe for you I'll use the new step-ups, the new pleasure build-ups, the *wow! boom!* just in from the science workshops. And who knows! if you qualify, we might just make all those big old sensors jump right down off the walls. From sex-pleasure. More than's ever been done before!" Then a little laugh and the slow wink of one blue blue eye.

"I'll try for the Grand Prize!" I yelled, not needing to hear her say more. What else in the world would one yell, under the circumstances!? "What do I do to earn it?"

She smiled. For her age I believe she was worldly wise, although I thought of her at the time as only a very beautiful and desirable young female, about my

own age, that I might win time with in a little room. *With pleasure step-ups!* "To earn it you have to win it. To win it you will visit various of the pain-pleasure testing rooms, or perhaps one Special Room, and be metered on your pain-pleasure reaction skills. Each room you visit, of course, will cost you money. Expenses, you know, upkeep. The normal number of rooms to visit is, I'd say, five—one each for each of the five senses. And then we have some who wish to pay the minimum fee and stake it all on one visit to one room. And that's really not such a bad idea, since the score is the average. One special room, one score, and then *me!* at the end of it all. That is, if you win—"

"*I'll take the one-room deal!*" I yelled, because it seemed to me she was trying to point me that way. Also, it should take less time that way. —No! I won't deny to anyone that I was in a hurry to get Miss Rejoyy and her new pleasure step-ups, the build-ups, the multipliers, alone in a little room, for a *wow! boom!*

So I paid the minimum fee (a steep minimum!) and contracted for the one-room deal that April day at the place of Miss Rejoyy. The one-room deal! What a room it must be to take the place of several in metering one's pain-pleasure reaction skills and still give one an equal chance to win out with Miss Rejoyy!

We left the Lavender Room to its crowded pots and plants. We walked down a darkened hall and Miss Rejoyy allowed me to know her wonderful softness and perfume near me once when she, seeming to stumble, almost fell against me. I clutched for her but she pulled away. "No!" she said. "Win me! Win me!" Oh, how I vowed that I would, but she, instead of listening long to my clumsy ardor, became all business. "If

you're going to compete, you'll have to be fitted up with a full complement of sensors," she directed. "They'll do that in the lab." "Yes!" I said, and the lights went out for me as she slammed into me with a small drug-filled needle she just happened to have at hand.

When I awoke I was on the cold floor in a dungeon which was really just part of the basement of the place of Miss Rejoyy. Almost every inch of me had a sensor attached to it and there were devices just under the skin, as well as things that seemed embedded quite deeply in what had once been inviolate me. Yes! I waved with ends of wires. I quivered with gummy bits of specially sentized plates just a little out from my skin. I went like a device set to meter the height and depth of the world. My first thought was to scream, of course, scream and keep on screaming. But then I thought *no*, play it cool, remember old Gulliver and all those others who have been tied down or drugged or otherwise taken by surprise in the world and then rose up to battle it.

As I walked to find Miss Rejoyy I could not help wondering how they had measured my father in the days before they had all this gear and all this preoccupation with metering. I almost had to believe they had evaluated him about as successfully, where it really counted, just by instinct and guess. But then, this is the age to be tested. —And there was Miss Rejoyy! "There you are!" she called. "You look good in that stuff," meaning the sensors. She broke a right arm gracefully at the wrist, in a very deminine way, waving at me, waggled her hands with some big amethyst rocks on them, and overall seemed quite limp and seductive. But just as my heart started really to pummel its lumpy cage again, she rallied, became all business and led

me away.

We walked for a hit in another darkened hall, and then we were at the door to The Room. Something pulsed in her hand and I saw that she was using, to open the room, a tiny amethyst-colored key that glowed in the dark. She shoved me inside. "Do your best," she called. "I may be watching you through observation slits in the wall, remember. Or I may just be in my attic hideaway asleep. But don't you forget it, however it goes, you're my champion now. And I'm yours in a little room, if you win. *And there's new pleasure step-ups!*" she yelled after her to remind me as she hurried away.

What a send-off! To know just what a send-off, you'd have to know Miss Rejoyy. *Miss Rejoyy!!*

What a room it was! It was everything I had expected. There was so much horror to see and thrill to, so much pleasure to feel and react to, that I hardly knew where to begin. I did some easy things first, such as holding some tiny piglets under water that were struggling to get out of a tub that was heating up. I held them submerged by their tails and ears, and when they pinwheeled and struggled and suffocated I felt the cruelty-pleasure sensors running up a very fine score. I tripped some leg-brace children struggling by and kicked both the good legs and the bad legs with really sharp authority where they fell. (Oh, how I enjoyed this, strangely!) I chopped off the tail of a cat that was dozing by a fire. Then I ran into a man who had lost five dear little kiddies, so he said, all the children he owned, in a bedroom blaze. I laughed when he told me his story, said, "Those who have *will* lose," and shoved him into a vat of hot oil that would certainly take his mind off kids and any other small troubles he might own.

Farther down the room I saw a display that I thought was really worth spending some time on. It was a rug sitter who not only was sitting on a rug of shiny silver darning needles but over and over also was attacking himself (where he was naked, which was almost all!) with a huge long silvery torture-supplement, a brush of blue-steel screws. He was a Miss Rejoyy misery display to show what really could be done with raw pain, I supposed. The needles of the meters attached to him were jumping with every stroke of the brush and with every shift as he sat, and he seemed to be trying for a higher and higher reading of personal hurt. The rug he sat on was soaked with old and fresh blood and blood ran from him at all times from the effects of both his seat and the torture-supplement, making it necessary at all times to transfuse. He winked at me as I approached, and I'll have to say, blood and all, transfusions and all, pain and all, he did not look more unhappy than many another man I have seen on many a business street on many an afternoon. "Did you come for your rug?" he called. "Or haven't you chosen yet?"

"I'm young yet," I countered, "don't rush me. I'm just here today, looking, feeling, smelling, tasting, hearing and reacting. I'm in a Miss Rejoyy contest."

He seemed somehow sorry for me, I thought, disappointed and temporarily morose as he slammed his face with a meat-softener hammer that stood nearby. "I think us rug sitters are the ultimate," he allowed. "But then, as you say, you're young yet. You make your own choice. And good luck."

From a natural impulse of compassion and fellow-feeling, making my "good" sensors sing, I asked him if there was anything I could do to help him to success, or anyway, ease, and he seemed

almost to rave, "Do to help me!? Now what in the world could a young whippersnip like you do for me, a rug sitter? We have it *all*, right here. We've met the world head-on, taken the Condition by its slippery horns, thrown it down, tied it up and sat on it—without any pads, ha ha. Where else in the world could I get paid, like Miss Rejoyy pays me, for taking a normal heating in the world day after day?"

A Miss Rejoyy attendant came hy then, gave me a sharp nudge, a broad wink and took me away. "Don't waste any more time with that rug sitter," she advised, "You're supposed to be reacting, not him. They're really small potatoes, anyway, those guys, and they think they're tops. Why, they don't even have step-ups for their pain, and yet they think they're suffering just because they lose all that blood from their seats and keep stroking themselves with the brush with the blue-steel screws. And when they do a little extra, like slam their faces with a meat-softener hammer or something, God! you'd think they were gods of pain. In fact, they think they've got pain wrapped up. *They just don't know!*"

"I feel like I've just seen the World Condition on a rug," I answered, "slapping itself with blue-steel screws." Then I took off for other and more sophisticated examples and displays of cruelty and pain.

But lest you think it was all too much cruelty and pain at this place of Miss Rejoyy, let me hasten to let you know that Miss Rejoyy did not neglect the love and ecstasy side of it one bit; there were really good times to register on the sensors—like little kids eating candy bars, like coming home to a heavy-load Xmas tree, like buying a giant office building and finding it full of booze. Your best brand! *Yes!* I plugged into some of

the "good" times and tried for high scores there. I read a Bible so small it should have been on pins, glued my eyes into the heavy magnifier and did not scoff at the Word. I ate a cake that should have taken a prize on any bake-out anywhere in the world, smelled flowers with scents headier than any heady wine, and heard music that was from angels, surely, recorded as valentines. I reacted and I reacted, I enjoyed and I enjoyed, I suffered and I suffered. Oh, I was good *good* and mean *mean*—and I mean I had me a hall!

At last it was over, my sensors were removed, and I was outside in a hall. And I *knew* I had won! Sometimes your mind tells you a thing with the clarity of a thousand suns shining through a thousand clear-blue days. The truth is that *truth* is the truth . . . the winners *all* shall win . . . Good effort shall be rewarded . . . *everytime* . . . Miss Rejoyy! my own, *my darling!* my dear . . .

Oh, it was a beautiful dream, that walk to the little room. It had a silver door and on that in lavender letters was that loved name, Miss Rejoyy. I was so much in love with her already that it seemed we had known each other and loved each other for more than a hundred years. Sometimes it's that way, and a thousand suns shine through, and soon we would be—Before I could knock, the door swung in so quietly it might have been only a piece of light, a mist, or a dream. My arms started to flare as I moved through the door and my eyes were half-closed so they could awaken on Miss Rejoyy in a lovely lavender negligee on a purple-satin bed. Her delicate tall-heeled slippers would be deep purple velvet waving with ostrich plumes dyed violet, and around her lustrous golden hair would be a queen's gold band with perhaps my name flashing there, spelled

with big amethysts. For hadn't she said I was her champion now? And she must know now of my high and winning scores.

What happened in that "little" room should not happen to us at all. Somehow, though we are mean *mean* and good *good*, we do not deserve this standoff on our dreams so, I believe. —Just as my arms were flared to receive her, so my eyes opened full to see her and it smote me as though the sun had left high heaven at high noon on a summer's day and had moved in right across from my front door. *With step-ups!* —In the first place it was not a bedroom. In the second place it was not a little room, but stretched on and on under high-up harsh lights, like a giant waiting room in the slowest clinic of all. Far at the front of the room, in an area of many small sandhags and purple balloons, Miss Rejoyy, in a heavy black-trouser uniform complete with high black hoots and black gloves, sat surrounded by huge and heefy guards with bright sharp axe heads on long poles. And she called roll names. After long hours she called my name. I went forward and she handed me a purple balloon that read, "*Bravo—but average,*" and a lavender sandhag that had stenciled on it in bright green letters of a fancy script, "*You tried hard, Sport—but you're just one of the gang.*" Then she waved me on brusquely—no chummies at all now—so that she could call other names.

I'm no fool. I know when the game is finished, played out to the end, lost and

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the hlur of faces crowded around the sides of the pit way up above. Way up above—why was he so small?

Then his eyes shifted as he heard the growling. Rod turned and looked up again, just in time to see the black grinning face looming over him, the giant mouth opening to reveal the rotting

over and gone *gone*. I'm no meek mouse either, and I could not help blurting, as I stamped and reacted and held up the roll-call line for quite some little while, "Well! if I ever have a son, you can bet your bottom purple garter I'll never tell him about this rat-house place and your cheat-chat. What a gyp!"

"*Yes you will!*" she shot back. "With the years you'll come to value more and more that walk to the 'little room,' that tiny instant for you in all of time, when you thought that you were special, when you were 'sure' that you had won. So what if it wasn't there for you? As for disappointments, you'll get used to them on the way to your permanent personal spot just a few feet heneath the top part of the lawn. *That's all there is!!*"

And she is right She Is Right *She is right . . .*

As the years roll by, I name her name more and more—Miss Rejoyy Missrejoyy missrejoyy . . . And I honor her for letting me know so early that winning is not *winning* not winning—winning is something else. Winning is learning to take, at the end of the heartbreak try, the purple balloon and the sand in the lavender sack and clutch them tightly as prize, then go on tight-lipped, upchinned and with always the drought in your stare, to your place at the foot of the stone in your permanent part of the lawn, as though you didn't know . . . *as though you didn't know!!!*

—David R. Bunch.

yellow teeth. It was only then that Rod knew what she had really done to him, as the huge hands grabbed out, pulling him close. For a moment he squawked and fluttered his wings.

Then the geek bit off his head.

—Robert Bloch

HASAN

PIERS ANTHONY

Second of Two parts

Illustrated by JEFF JONES

Piers Anthony concludes his epic novel of adventure and enchantment in the land of the Arabian Nights as Hasan sets out on his greatest quest: the journey to the magical Isles of Wak to regain his beloved Sana, the Bird-Maiden!

SYNOPSIS

HASAN was only a youthful goldsmith when BAHRAM, the Persian Alchemist, offered to teach him the means of turning base metal into gold. Naive, trusting, HASAN was easily gulled by the magician's tongue; they ate bread and salt together, and then the Persian drugged a sweetcake. When next HASAN regained consciousness they were aboard a vessel, bound for the distant isle of Serendip. BAHRAM had kidnapped him, and had stripped his old mother's house of its wealth and goods in the bargain!

After some adventure, the boat landed them on Serendip, where BAHRAM summoned three camels by beating upon a magical drum. There then commenced an arduous overland journey inland to the great mountain that divided the island. When they reached the foot of its sheer cliffs, BAHRAM told HASAN that he desired the lad to fetch for him a certain article from the top of the mountain; this article was the rarest ingredient in the potion which turned base metal to gold.

"Follow my instructions and do not play me false, and you and I shall share appropriately in the profit," the wiley Persian told him, and HASAN despite his doubts and misgivings allowed himself to be again convinced by the man. BAHRAM slew a camel, gutted it, and sewed HASAN inside it, and then retreated. After a time a roc flew down, investigated the dead camel, and flew back with it—and HASAN inside it—to its lair on the mountain top. Once there, HASAN cut his way free, collected the article he had been bid to fetch, and threw it down to BAHRAM. He then asked the magician how he was to descend, and BAHRAM laughed and told him it was obvious. "O, I have known some handsome lads, but none quite so foolish as you!" BAHRAM said. "Why, you jump down, boy!" And at this HASAN understood the meaning of the heaps of human bones that littered the mountain top. He was not the first fool to be gulled by BAHRAM's deceitful tongue.

Left for dead, HASAN by luck discovered a series of chains fastened to the cliff face,

hidden to all but the most searching eye, and descended them to the jungle below.

Earlier, when journeying with **BAHRAM** to the mountain, they had passed in the distance a palace of green domes. **HASAN** had inquired after it, but **BAHRAM** had told him only that it was a place of ghouls and devils. Since they had seen no other sign of habitation, and because he could not believe such a beautiful palace could be the work or dwelling place of evil spirits, **HASAN** now struck out in the direction of that palace.

There he entered a courtyard to surprise two sisters at chess, both without their veils. The younger one, **ROSE**, impulsively adopted **HASAN** as her brother—and this, as it developed, for good reason.

ROSE is the youngest of seven sisters—**HASAN** learns the names of them all, but thinks of them as **ELDEST**, **SECOND**, **THIRD**, etc., but for **ROSE** (it was **SIXTH** and **ROSE** he first met in the courtyard)—whose father is a mighty king in the land of Sind. The King, so **ROSE** says, became a convert to the True Belief in Allah, but since his people remained faithful to the Hindu religion, he would marry his daughters to none of them, but instead exiled them in this magnificent palace on Serendip, where he would upon occasion visit them, and from which they sometimes returned his visits. They are lonely for the company of a son of Adam, and welcome **HASAN**, but had he not become their brother he would not have been allowed to remain alive. On the other hand, as their brother **HASAN** cannot avail himself of more than sisterly companionship from them, and although he came to love them all, it was sometimes a matter of frustration for him.

He spent some months with them and then it was learned that **BAHRAM** had returned to the mountain's foot with a new



captive youth. Backed by the seven sisters, decked out in armor, HASAN rode out to challenge BAHRAM and seek his revenge. This he did, slaying the Persian when that man leapt upon him and impaled himself on HASAN's sword. But HASAN was troubled by the vision BAHRAM had summoned up to dissuade him: his mother, haggard and near death's door, weeping before a tomb. It was HASAN's. She was bewailing his desertion and probable death.

Nonetheless, HASAN returned to the palace with the seven sisters, after setting free the captive youth and awarding him all BAHRAM's possessions. And once more surrounded by magnificence, HASAN put all thoughts of his mother from him.

It came to pass that the sisters were summoned to visit their father, and departed the palace, leaving HASAN alone there. In his loneliness he wandered about its many gardens and courtyards, its chambers and apartments, finding little pleasure in his solitude. Finally, going against all warning, he unlocked the single door he was told to leave locked, finding beyond it only an empty room and a stair that spiralled upwards. He climbed the stair to find himself upon the palace roof, there to discover another garden, loveliest of all, a pavilion, and a pool. As he looked about him, ten magnificent birds flew out of the sky, larger than eagles, but smaller than rocs. They landed upon the roof garden, opened their feather garments, and stepped out of them as lovely young women. Then, while HASAN looked out from his hiding place, they swam and played in the pool. HASAN had never before looked upon the nude charms of such beautiful women, and his heart went out to the one who was obviously their princess. She was lovelier than any woman he had ever seen! All too soon, the women dried themselves, donned their bird-suits, transforming themselves

once more into birds, and flew away. HASAN was left desconsolate, heartbroken with unrequited yearning.

When the sisters returned, they found HASAN a sickly shadow of himself, for he had not eaten or slept since the day he had spied upon the bird-maidens—and although he had watched for them again each day, they had not returned. HASAN finally confessed what he had done to ROSE, telling her of his broken heart. Poor ROSE—pledged to be his sister, she loved him quite as much as he did his beautiful bird-maiden. But she schemed with him a plan whereby he might capture his love. With her help he set up a watch on the rooftop garden, and when the bird-maidens flew again down from the sky, he waited his chance and then stole his beloved's suit of feathers, hiding it in the bottom of a trunk in his apartment. And when she discovered it was gone, she set up a cry, and she and her handmaidens searched the rooftop gardens for it, to no avail. Then, at dusk, the others deserted her, flying off into the sky, and HASAN captured her and took her down into the palace.

There the sisters helped him, translating his avowal of love to her in her own strange language, and arranging her marriage to him. Her name was SANA, and ROSE told her HASAN had burned the suit of feathers, so she assented to become HASAN's wife.

There followed a period of forty days of wedded bliss, during which time HASAN learned something of SANA's language and she of his, and he found her intelligent, clever, but docile. Then he dreamed a dream in which he saw his mother, near to the brink of death, mourning over the tomb of her lost son, and it shocked him with the knowledge of his own selfishness.

Telling the sisters that he must return to his own home, he summoned up a caravan of animals with BAHRAM's magic drum,

and with his wife took leave of the palace. The sisters loaded him down with gifts of gold and other wealth, and demanded he visit them regularly. ROSE fainted with sorrow at his leave-taking.

Returning to his native town of Bassorah, HASAN found his mother as he had dreamed her. But when he presented himself, his beautiful wife, and his great wealth to her, it cheered her greatly, and she returned once more to the realm of life.

The old house was hardly suitable any longer—it was a hovel after the palace of the seven sisters—so HASAN moved his family to Baghdad, where he acquired the mansion of a former wazir, the ranking minister to the Caliph preceding Harun al-Rashid, the present Caliph. There in the next three years SANA bore him two sons, NASIR and MANSUR, and they lived in peace and happiness. But in time HASAN came to realize he was bored. He possessed everything he had dreamed of as an immature youth—but he missed the adventure he had once known. And he had not visited his sisters on Serendip, as he had promised.

Beset by nostalgia and longing, he decided to make the trip at once. Taking his mother aside, he confided in her the secret of the feathered garment still hidden in his old trunk, telling her never to allow SANA to know of it, else she might do it and fly away with their two sons. He did not know it, but his wife overheard his entire conversation.

After he had left, SANA took herself to the Hammam, the public bath, where every lady and slave-woman was forced to exclaim over her exceeding beauty. Their envy was made no less by the fact that she had birthed two sons, since most women quickly lost their beauty after motherhood. News of SANA was brought to the LADY ZUBAYDAH, chief wife of the Caliph

himself, and she commanded SANA, HASAN's mother, and the two sons be brought to her that she might see SANA's beauty for herself. Once presented to LADY ZUBAYDAH, SANA made the request that her feathered garment be fetched so that she might amaze and delight the LADY with it. Despite the protests of HASAN's mother, this was done. Delighted, SANA donned the garment, gathered up her two small sons, and flew away, leaving HASAN's mother with this parting message: "O mother of my husband," she chirped, "indeed it irks me to part from you, for your heart is good; but your son surprised me in my innocence and captured me by force, and there was nothing I could do but yield myself to him after he had seen my shame and deprived me of my freedom. Moreover, he is not my husband, for I am not a Moslem, nor do my people recognize your marriage-customs. But if your son grows lonely and desires to see me again, let him come to me in the Isles of Wak!"

The LADY ZUBAYDAH was not sorry to see this potential rival gone, and was happy for it, but HASAN's mother dug three graves in the courtyard of their home to represent the lost members of the household and spent her days and nights in a mournful watch, unable to assuage her grief.

And HASAN, when he returned to find his wife and sons gone, prostrated himself with grief, tearing his clothes, buffetting his face and throwing himself to the floor like a madman.

Chapter Seven

"O my brother," Rose exclaimed with mixed emotions. "What is the matter, that you should come again so soon after we saw you last? It has hardly been two months."

Hasan had certainly ridden hard. "I've

lost my wife," he said, then clung to her for support.

Rose screamed, and the other princesses gathered around, not knowing how to comfort him. The thing had happened while he was visiting with them, and they felt in part responsible for his misfortune.

"By Allah!" Rose swore bitterly. "How many times I meant to make you burn that feather-suit. Some evil spirit made me forget. Don't you have any idea at all where she went?"

"All she said was 'Let him come to me in the Isles of Wak.'"

Eldest brightened. "Wak? That's her home."

Sixth, the librarian, was not enthusiastic. "That doesn't help us, sister. She may be there, but no one else can follow her."

"But I must!" Hasan protested. "I cannot live without my wife and sons! Is there no one who can help me?"

The sisters exchanged furtive glances. Suddenly Rose jumped up. "What about Uncle Ah? He knows everything!"

Eldest nodded thoughtfully. "He could tell us whether it is possible, at least."

"What are you talking about?" Hasan asked.

Rose threw her arms about him. "He's our father's brother, Abd al-Kaddus. He wasn't given a kingdom, so he practices magic. He's not a Moslem, so it's all right. He's the dearest old gentleman!"

Hasan was impressed. "Where can I find him?"

"You don't have to find him. He'll come here."

"But if your family finds out that I'm here—"

Rose laughed. "Not Uncle Ah. He wouldn't turn us in. He knows all about your stay with us."

"Your father's brother?" Hasan was incredulous.

"He and Daddy don't ride the same elephant. He always did say we should all get married to Hindu princes and raise big big families." She paused reflectively. "I wish—"

"Rose!"

"Well, anyway, he'll help us if anyone can. We'll summon him right away."

"Right away tomorrow," Eldest said firmly. "Our brother must have some rest."

Hasan's misery abated, now that hope existed, and he joined them in a sumptuous meal. It was several tomorrows before they made the necessary preparations, and in that time he recovered much of his health and strength.

They gathered in a court and built a small fire. When it was blazing merrily, Eldest produced a delicately carved wooden box and took a small pouch from it. From this she shook a minute amount of pungent powder into her palm. "O Abd al-Kaddus, come to us!" she intoned, and cast her powder into the flame.

A perfumed cloud of smoke drifted up, reminding Hasan uncomfortably of Bahram's evil magic. "Are you sure you can trust him?" he asked.

"You'll find out," Rose said, and guided him outside.

Across the plain came a cloud of dust very like the miniature smoke-hall they had just quitted. An elephant emerged from it with a white-bearded gentleman perched in a howdah on its back. The man waved and made signals with his hands, and the elephant trumpeted. The sisters waved back; but apparently fearing that they hadn't seen him, the man kicked out his feet and signaled with them too.

Presently he drew up and dismounted. Eldest ran over and threw her arms about him in a feminine display Hasan had never seen her exhibit before. "Welcome, Uncle Ab!"

The man embraced her with affection and patted her behind. "You're getting to be a big girl," he said. "Time you got married."

"Uncle, you *know* our father—"

"Hm, yes—but he is a fishbrain. Why do you listen to him? My daughters never listen to *me*."

"Uncle—you don't *have* any daughters!"

Ah considered. "Must do something about that, one of these decades." He saluted the remaining sisters in turn, making remarks which brought dainty blushes to their cheeks. At last he came to Hasan.

"My, you're an ugly one," he remarked.

"Uncle—that's Hasan," Rose protested.

Ab looked again. "I did think there was one too many," he admitted. "But then, why should I notice anyone who doubts me?"

"O Shaykh Abd—" Hasan began, using the polite title.

"Don't 'Shaykh' *me*, junior. I distinctly heard you remark, just after my niece summoned me—"

It was Hasan's turn to blush. "I told you," was Rose's smug reminder.

"There I was, sitting at ease with my dear wife, your aunt, when I smelled the perfume and knew my nieces needed me. And what do I hear but this—"

"He's sorry, Uncle," Eldest said.

Ab smiled at her, mollified. She was obviously his favorite. "Well, if you say so, my dear. Why did you call me?"

"O Uncle, we longed to see you, since you haven't visited us for over a year."

"Hm. Well, I was busy, but I was going to visit you tomorrow."

"And now our brother Hasan has a terrible problem, and only you can help him." And they told their uncle everything that had happened.

"Wak, eh?" he muttered. He shook his head and bit his finger thoughtfully. Then he squatted and began to make marks in the earth with his finger-tips.

"If you could just tell me how far away it is—" Hasan began.

"How far?" Ab shook his head again.

"Not far, lad, as the roc flies."

"But the roc can cover a year's journey in a single day," Rose said.

"Nineteen hours," Ah corrected her absently. "Anyway, someone's been soaring those poor birds by jumping out of camels, or something. Must put a stop to that. Bad for their morale." He lapsed into silence, looked right and left, and shook his head a third time.

"Please give us some answer," Eldest urged him. "Our brother is sorely afflicted, and we hardly know how to console him."

Ab looked at her. "If I were you—"

"Uncle!"

Ab sighed. "O my daughters, you have no way to console him, then, for he can not gain access to the Isles of Wak."

"But Shaykh—"

"Between this place and those isles lie seven mighty mountains and seven tremendous gorges and seven turbulent oceans. A mortal man could not make his way there though he had the flying jinn with him and the wandering stars. Far better you consider your spouse and sons to be dead, and turn back to your home and stop tormenting your spirit. I give you good council, if you will only accept it."

Hasan cried out and fell to the ground,

and the princesses wept for his sorrow. Rose tore her clothes and huffed her face and fainted from the stress of her emotion, landing neatly beside Hasan.

"O be quiet!" Ah said, disturbed by the spectacle.

"Will you help us?" Rose inquired from the ground, momentarily recovered.

"I don't have any more sense than your father!" Ab growled.

"O thank you, Uncle!" the sisters cried together, embracing him *en masse*.

"Clear out! Stand on your own fourteen feet!" he grunted. "Take heart, lad, and you will win your foolish wish in spite of these creatures, if it be the will of Allah."

"But you don't worship Allah, Uncle."

"Still a perfectly good name to swear by. Rise, O my son, collect your courage, and follow me."

"O Hasan, you're leaving us again!" Rose cried.

Ab cut her off. "Desist, girl. We'll never get moving if you start all that again."

"At least stay the night," Eldest pleaded. "We'll have music and a feast."

Ab paused. "Never could stand your music."

"Daddy wouldn't approve, anyway," Rose said.

"I don't give a fig in the fire what that coconut-head approves! Where's my room?"

Next morning, or perhaps the one following that, Hasan mounted the elephant behind the venerable gentleman and waved good-bye to his sisters once again. Partings seemed to come more frequently now, but each one wrenched his heart all over.

The elephant ambled along for three days, during which time Abd al-Kaddus did his best to dissuade Hasan from his venture. Hasan suspected that the trip would have been much shorter, otherwise,

since the man had already demonstrated his ability to travel almost instantaneously. "Know, O my foolish son, that the Isles of Wak are seven in number, inhabited by a mighty host, all virgin girls. The inner islands are peopled by demons and marids and warlocks and various tribesmen of the jinn, and whoever enters that land never returns—at least, none have done so yet. So return to your people with the blessing of Yahweh, and—" "Yahweh?"

"Zorothustra, then. Forget this damsel you're smitten with, for she's no damsel at all but the daughter of the King of all the Isles, and you can never aspire to her. Lister to me, my son, and perhaps Brahma will replace her with a better wife."

"O my lord," Hasan said. "They could cut me in pieces and my love would only redouble. There is no help for it; I must enter the Isles of Wak and come to the sight of my wife and children. I'll return with them or never return at all!"

"My boy, think of your poor weary mother and your seven fine sisters. Don't make them spend their lives in torment because of your idiocy."

"I'll die anyway, if I don't recover Sana."

Ab shook his head, resigned, and the elephant journeyed on.

At length they came to a vast blue mountain whose stones were azure. A massive iron door was set in its base with curious inscriptions upon it.

Hasan studied the mysterious writing. "That's the language of Confucious," Ab said. "I stole that door from—"

"You stole it from a god?" Hasan was dismayed, forgetting that there were no gods but Allah.

"Confucious isn't a god. Whatever gave you that idea? Anyway, I never knew the gentleman personally." He raised his fist and rapped the metal.

A monstrous black slave opened the door from the inside, as fierce and hairless as an ifrit. He carried a sword in his right hand and a steel shield on his left arm. "Master!" he cried, kneeling to kiss the Shaykh's hand.

Ab led Hasan inside, and the slave drew the door shut behind them. They were in a huge and spacious cavern, lighted in some enchanted fashion, through which ran a towering corridor. They traveled along this for what seemed like a full mile to Hasan, until it abutted upon a large open space. Then Ab angled off toward an elbow of the mountain and stopped before two huge doors cast of solid brass.

The old man went up to the left door and set his shoulders. "Wait here," he said ominously, "and I'll be back presently. On no account are you to follow me inside."

Hasan agreed, uncertain what was about to happen, and sat down against the wall between the doors. Ab opened the portal a crack, slid within, and drew it firmly closed. There was silence.

Hasan sat for a full hour, fidgeting. He admired the enormous dripping vaults of the cave. Ponderous swords of stone hung from the ceiling, many times the size of a man and pointed at the tip, so that he was afraid to pass underneath. Rows of colored rock rose from the floor: dragon's teeth, perhaps. Was the dragon near? He did not feel easy, here.

A crash, a snort, and the door burst open. Hasan bounded to his feet, reaching for his dagger—but it was only Abd al-Kaddus, leading a spirited black stallion. It was a beautiful horse, with sleek flanks and a short nose, bridled and saddled with velvet trappings. Its prancing hoofs scarcely seemed to touch the ground, and Hasan could tell that this was the swiftest

of animals.

"Mount!" Ab panted. "This beast is uncontrollable without a rider."

Hasan mounted, and felt the eager surge of the stallion beneath him. What a horse this was!

"Keep tight rein on him, or I won't answer for your safety," Ab warned him. He opened the second door.

Beyond it was an endless desert, burning and barren. Hasan guided the horse outside and held it steady.

Ab banded him a long roll. "O my son, take this scroll and go where this steed will carry you. When he stops at the door to a cavern like this, dismount and throw the reins over the saddle-bow and let him go. He will enter the cavern, but you must stay outside. Stay there five days, and don't go away. On the sixth day a black shaykh clad all in sable, with a long white beard flowing down to his navel, will come out. As soon as you see him, kiss his hands and seize his skirt and lay it on your head and weep before him, until he takes pity on you and asks you what you want. Then give him this scroll. He will take it without speaking and return to his cavern. Wait outside another five days. If the shaykh comes out the sixth day himself, all is well; but if one of his pages emerges, depart in all haste, for he comes to kill you. Then may the mercy of Buddha be upon you, for he who takes such chances risks death; on the other hand, he who won't gamble can't win. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Uncle," Hasan said more bravely than he felt.

"Now you don't have to risk your life this way, you know. If you'd rather return to your friends, the elephant is still here. You can ride back—"

"I must go on."

"That's what I thought. You're

lovemad. Well, in this letter I have presented a strict account of your case to Abu al-Ruwaysh, son of Bilkis, daughter of Mu'in, for he is my mentor and my teacher, and all men and all jinn humble themselves before him and stand in awe of him. And now go with the blessing of—who is it?"

"Allah—I think."

"With the blessing of Allah!" Ab slapped the flank of the horse and it galloped away with a surge that rendered any formal leavetaking impossible. Hasan was on his way.

He rode. The stallion raced all day across the desert, never changing direction or easing his pace. Hasan looked about him at first, wondering whether he was still on Serendip; but as the hours passed he grew weary, and his thighs chafed with the steady movement.

Night came, but still the steed pounded on, flinging back occasional spume from its flaring nostrils.

Hasan nodded sleepily. When was this ride going to end? Did the horse never tire? He looked down—and knew he was dreaming, for the flashing hoofs appeared to be galloping over deep water. Water!

The long night passed; the sun came up on his right. Hasan's legs were throbbing with fatigue, and he was desperate for a call of nature. The horse was running through strange country, up a long coastline with the ocean to the east. Mountains rose to the west, and the land was a wild deep jungle. But evidently the mountains in sight were not his destination.

Hasan sat up straight and hauled on the reins. The stallion bucked and skittered, unwilling to be restrained, but it slowed and finally came to a halt in a deep forest.

He was about to dismount, but remembered Ab's remark that the beast was uncontrollable without a rider. Yet he had to get off for a few minutes, at least. Why hadn't Ab told him the trip was going to be so long?

He searched through the saddlebags. In one was a folded tunic. He drew it out, but was surprised to discover that it was not after all an article of clothing, though of rich design. It was an oddly shaped sack.

A sack—or a hood? Suddenly he remembered the way Eldest controlled her falcons. Would it work on a horse?

He leaned forward and dropped the hood over the stallion's head. There was no complaint. This had to be it!

He dismounted, keeping his hand on the bridle, but the horse did not move. He retreated among the trees and did his business; then he located a small stream and performed the morning ablution. His legs were stiff and very sore, but at least the most pressing discomfort had been eased.

He was hungry! He had not realized this until drinking from the cool stream. He'd better find something to eat. There was no way to tell how long this journey would be.

He walked around the horse and delved into the opposite saddlebag. There were packages of something. He withdrew one, opened it, and looked at the brown lump inside. Bread? It didn't smell like it. He took an experimental bite.

The stuff was dense and chewy, but not unpleasant to the taste. How could he be certain it was edible?

Hasan took out another package, unwrapped it, and poked it under the covered nose of the horse. The animal sniffed, then took a gigantic bite that just missed his fingers. This might be

horsefeed, but at least it should be safe. He attacked his own chunk in earnest.

Strength flowed into his arms and legs. He felt full of fire. He could run for miles without tiring. He neighed.

It was horse feed all right. Hasan checked his appetite as he led the stallion to water. Best not to eat too much of the stuff.

He rode. Days shot by under the flashing hoofs, and scenic lakes and valleys and mountains passed in review. The ocean to his right disappeared, but the sun showed his route to continue north. Occasionally the horse skirted native villages, the dark-skinned tribesmen staring curiously. Could any of this country be Sind?

The land opened out into a mighty plain with rich black soil. They crossed a river as large as the Tigris. Now Hasan became assured that the steed was magic, for it ran on the surface of the water as though it were sand.

On what Hasan estimated was the tenth day a vast mountain range arose ahead, walling the world from east to west. The peaks were towering and white at the tops; Hasan was sure that nowhere else on earth did their like exist.

The stallion neighed exuberantly as it approached the forbidding range, and there were answering neighs. Horses flocked to it, mares as numerous as drops of rain on the monsoon wind. They thronged so tightly that their backs made a restless sea; they pressed so close that Hasan's legs were pinned against the flanks of his steed. What did this mean? Abd al-Kaddus had not advised him of this situation, either.

It occurred to him that there were many things in life that friends could not or did not predict.

There was nothing he could do except

maintain his seat and fare forward, hoping for the best. And so at last he came to the mountain cavern, accompanied by thousands of mares.

The stallion drew up at the entrance and Hasan dismounted. He threw the rein over the saddle and let the animal go, half expecting it to frolic among its companions. That feed was potent stuff. But it trotted up to the door, opened it with a blow of its front hoof, and disappeared inside.

Hasan waited, but the door did not open again. Once more he grew hungry and thirsty—but Ab had told him not to leave this spot. He dared not disobey the instructions. Magic was involved, and his perils were great enough already. But he would starve before his vigil was up, since it was scheduled for five full days, with five more to follow that. It was cold; what would the nights be like?

He thought of Sana and his children, and recovered strength. He would survive somehow. Allah would provide a way. There were horses, waiting at the door for their stallion to return. He could kill one and live off its flesh. He could squeeze juice from the fruits of the bushes. He would survive.

But no such drastic measures were necessary. Several of these mares had foals. He caught and milked them, careful not to take from the same one twice in succession, so that there would be milk for the foal as well. At night he bound one and curled up beside her, using the heat from her body to drive away the cold that would otherwise have destroyed him.

This was not his idea of luxury, but he was man enough now to sacrifice convenience for the sake of his objectives. The thought of his family bore him up. Unless he prevailed, his children would

grow up fatherless and his old mother would die alone and unmourned. There was grief enough without failure on his part.

The prescribed time passed. The door opened. A man came out, his robe as black as his face. Hasan recognized him as the Shaykh Abu al-Ruwaysh, and threw himself at the man's feet.

"What do you want, O my son?"

Wordlessly Hasan handed up the scroll. The shaykh accepted it and re-entered the cavern, making no reply.

Five more days passed. Hasan's nervousness increased as he thought about his situation. If the shaykh did not come out the second time, his quest was a failure. He would have either to escape or kill the page, then make his way home, never to see his lovely wife again. It was too horrible to contemplate.

On the sixth day the door opened and a white figure emerged. The page! Hasan staggered back, stricken, but reached for his sword.

The figure made no hostile sign, and Hasan relaxed. It was the shaykh after all—this time in a white robe. His petition had been accepted!

The old man took him by the hand and brought him into the cavern. This was even more extensive than the other. Sputtering torches lit the cold passages, and twists and turns were so numerous that he soon lost track of direction. It seemed hours before they stopped at an arched doorway with a panel of steel for a door. The shaykh opened this and led the way into a vestibule vaulted with onyx, arabesqued with gold and blessedly warm.

They passed through this and came to a wide hall, paved and walled with marble. In its midst was a flower-garden containing a variety of trees and flowers

and fruits, with birds warbling on the boughs and singing sweetly. There were four daises facing inward, and in each a jetting fountain at whose corners stood golden statues of lions spouting water from their mouths into the basin.

On each dais stood a chair, and in each chair sat an elderly sage with a library of books before him and golden censers containing fire and perfumes. Students gathered around each elder, reading the books to him.

When Hasan and Abu al-Ruwaysh entered, the sages stood up and did the shaykh honor. The shaykh gestured them to dismiss their scholars, and they obeyed promptly. The four then seated themselves before him and inquired about Hasan.

The shaykh turned to him. "Tell this company your tale—everything that has happened to you from the beginning of your adventure until the end."

Hasan obliged, relating the manner in which Bahram the Persian magician had appeared and tricked him with promises and dazzled him with gold and kidnapped him into a mighty adventure.

"You are one of the lads that man sent up to the Mountain of Clouds in camel-hides?" they asked, amazed.

"I am."

They turned to the shaykh. "Never have we heard of someone surviving that ordeal. How did he get down?"

"Tell them, Hasan."

So Hasan continued his story, leading up to his marriage with the princess of Wak and her subsequent escape.

"Verily," the sages exclaimed, "this youth is to be both admired and pitied. Surely, O elder of elders, you will help him to recover his wife and children."

The old man pulled sadly at his beard. "This is a grave and perilous matter. This

youth is determined to throw away his life. The Isles of Wak are very hard to reach, and no one can go there without risking his life. The empire of Wak is very powerful. Moreover, I have sworn an oath not to tread the soil of that land or transgress against its people in any way. How then shall I help this man to come at the favorite daughter of their King?

"O shaykh of shaykhs, this man is consumed with desire for his family, and he has already risked his life to come to you from our brother-in-scholarship, Abd al-Kaddus, who has importuned your help. He has endured the trial of ten days without the gate, which few men survive. How can you deny his plea?"

Hasan went to the old man and threw himself down before him. "I beg of you—reunite me with my wife and children, though it cost me my life and my soul!"

"It is liable to, Hasan—that is why I hesitate."

But the four elders continued to plead for Hasan, and finally the shaykh relented. "This willful youth little comprehends what he's getting into," he murmured, "but we'll help him to whatever extent we can."

Hasan and the elders rejoiced. Ahu al-Ruwaysh took up his pen and a sheet of fine paper and wrote a letter, which he rolled up and sealed and gave to Hasan. Then he produced a pouch of perfumed leather which contained incense and firesticks and similar magic. "Take strict care of this pouch. If you get into trouble, burn a little of the incense and speak my name, and I will come to you and help." He spoke to one of the elders. "Fetch me a flying ifrit."

"One of the jinn?" the sage asked, startled. "As you wish."

Hasan marveled. Could these sages

actually summon a jinni?

The elder left, to return shortly with a horrendous ifrit in tow. Hasan had never seen such a creature before. It resembled a huge, grotesque man, with a muscular body, two descending tusks, and mighty wings. Yet, stripped of these special features, it would not have been unhandsome. Certainly it was more closely related to man than to the animals, and perhaps its sympathies would normally also lie with man. Of course it had no soul, but—

"What is your name?" the shaykh asked the ifrit.

"Dahnash hin Faktash," the creature boomed.

"Come over here."

The ifrit approached, and the shaykh put his mouth up to its ear and said something. "I accept, O elder of elders!" Dahnash said.

The shaykh spoke to Hasan. "Arise, O my son, and mount the shoulders of this ifrit, Dahnash the Flyer. But be careful: when he ascends into the heavens and you hear the angels glorifying God with their hymns, don't you try to imitate them, or you will both perish."

"I won't say a word," Hasan said. "No, never."

"O Hasan, after faring with you all today, Dahnash will set you down at peep of dawn tomorrow in a land cleanly white, as though it were made of camphor. That is as far as he can go; you will have to walk the rest of the way. After ten days you'll come to a city. Enter the gate and ask for the King. When you come into his presence salute him and kiss his hands; then present to him this scroll and pay careful attention to his advice. Farewell!"

"Farewell," the four elders echoed. Hasan was getting accustomed to the abrupt manner of acquaintance and

leave-taking in these enchanted realms, and accepted his dismissal gracefully.

"Hearing and obeying," he said, and climbed onto the ifrit's broad shoulders, trying not to bang the wings.

"Take care of him, Dahnash the Firedrake!" the shaykh called, and the powerful wings spread and raised up a confusion of dust.

"I'll take care of him!" the ifrit muttered as the world tilted dizzily. Hasan didn't like the sound of this; but by the time he got his bearings they were above the mountain, rising into a calm morning sky.

Hasan was perched on the ifrit's shoulders, seated between the wings with his feet dangling on either side of the thick neck. This had seemed secure enough when the ifrit stood upright in the cavern; but high in the air and horizontal it became the most precarious lodging. He glanced down, saw the mountain features passing far below, and instinctively drew back—almost losing his balance in the other direction. He was not on the Mountain of Clouds; he could not retreat from the dangerous drop-off so easily, this time!

"Sit still, mortal—want to throw us into a tailspin?" the ifrit demanded.

Hasan sat very still. He kept his eyes fixed to the sky above, trying to imagine that he was riding a camel on the ground. This helped. Why should he believe that he had not only seen a demon of the air, but now rode the back of one? Nonsense—but don't look down.

The experience of air travel was not unpleasant. The atmosphere was cool—chill, in fact—but the wind whistling around his ears was invigorating. How unfortunate that man would never be able to fly without the aid of the birds or jinn! He watched a

cottonpuff cloud come down—they were still climbing!—and was irrationally seized with the desire to tread the spongy surface. He had always wondered what plants might grow on the sunlit tops of these floating islands. What a delightful castle might be built on such a paradise, subject to no monarch and forever free of bad weather!

"Dahnash," he said.

"Yes, mortal?"

"Can we park on that little cloud ahead for a moment?"

The ifrit's body shuddered. Hasan was alarmed. Had something happened? Then he realized that the creature was shaking with laughter. "Park on a cloud!" Dahnash exclaimed. "Ho ho!"

Hasan was nettled. "The shaykh didn't forbid it, did he?"

"Watch, mortal."

The ifrit came up level with the cloud and accelerated toward it. Hasan had to cling frantically as the wind tore at his body.

The cloud loomed larger. Far from being a tiny puff, it was an immense boulder of material, white at the top and with a flat gray bottom.

"Dahnash! You're going to collide!"

"Back-seat driver. Ho ho!" the first laughed, and swooped ahead faster. The outlines of the cloud grew hazy, as though it were surrounded by an atmosphere of its own.

Hasan stared, terrified. Had the demon betrayed him? Did it plan to kill him by dashing him against the cloud? Why had the shaykh trusted him to its care?

They were in the foglike outer fringes. The cloud was so close he couldn't make out the solid outlines at all. Everything was grayness and fleeting mists.

Then the sun reappeared. Dahnash had dodged it after all! He had only skirted

the edge.

"You see, mortal?"

"You certainly frightened me," Hasan admitted, deciding honest flattery was the safest policy. "But I still don't understand why you think it's so funny to land on a cloud. Does something dangerous live upon it?"

Dahnash craned his head around to look at Hasan. "You serious? That *was* the cloud, mortal."

"But all we touched was a little mist."

"Now don't take offense, mortal—but you are ignorant as hell. That's all a cloud is. Mist."

"I can never believe that!"

"Brother!" the ifrit sighed. "Some company you are going to be." He sighed again. "And they say men are going to take over the world!"

Hasan was embarrassed and angry. "If you're so smart, why do you have to obey the shaykh? He's a man."

"Mortal, there are men and there are men. The shaykh is the greatest of mortals, while I am the least of immortals. There is a certain minimal overlap. Anyway, he offered a pretty good deal."

"Well, why do they say one man is worth a thousand jinn? If you're so powerful—"

"Who says that?"

"Men say it. Everyone knows—"

"Men say it," the ifrit mimicked. "What preposterous audacity! What phenomenal delusions of grandeur! Did you ever hear an *ifrit* say it? Did you ever hear Allah say it? Can you document such a statement?"

"Well, we have souls, don't we? You don't."

"Mortal—we *are* souls!"

Hasan was disgruntled. "What did the shaykh offer you for this job?" he asked,

trying to modify the subject.

"Ah, that." Dahnash was silent for a moment, and Hasan thought he wasn't going to answer. "He promised to put in a good word for me with the council of marids. I'm eligible for promotion, and—"

"Marids?" Hasan was concerned. "You mean those big black funnels that tear ships apart?"

"Funnels? Mortal, when a marid tears loose he doesn't bother with trifles. He sweeps across the ocean with the power of a thousand thunderstorms, blacks out the sky, sinks every ship on the sea and destroys entire cities with the force of his breath."

"His breath! You mean he *blows* down houses and. . . Allah strike you down for such a story!"

"You'd be in pretty poor circumstances right now if Allah *did*," Dahnash observed dryly, glancing down. Hasan involuntarily followed his gaze, and felt immediately sick. They were very high. Suddenly he didn't feel like arguing any more.

"I suppose I don't know much about the jinn," he said.

"Never fear, mortal—you have inquired at the proper stall." Dahnash took a deep breath and launched into an extemporaneous lecture. "Know, O child of Adam, that Allah in his wisdom—yes, I am a True Believer—and omnipotence created three species of intelligent beings to dwell upon the earth. From the light He made the Angels, who are sanctified from carnal desire and the disturbance of anger. They don't know what they're missing, if you ask me. They disobey not His will; their food is the celebration of His glory, their drink the proclamation of His holiness, their conversation the commemoration of His name, and their

pleasure His worship.

"From the Fire he made the Genii, ranked in five orders: the lowest are the Jann, who have little power; next are the Jinn (though this term is over-used generically); then the Devils; then Ifrits; and finally the most powerful of all, the Marids. Each of these groups maintains its representatives on land, in the sea and in the air. I am a flying ifrit—and it is from *my* group the whirling funnels come. We are second only to the marids."

"But you have nearly human shape," Hasan said, fascinated.

"Do you want me to change?" Dahnash demanded, and Hasan hastily demurred. "We can assume any shape we wish, except that the larger it is, the more diffuse it becomes. I could become the size of an ant—but I would be an exceedingly heavy ant, and have strength to crush stone in my pincers. I could become a hundred feet tall—but I would have no more substance than that cloud we flew through. That's why our form changes so much. The size determines it. A man-shaped, hundred-foot ifrit would be blown all out of shape by the wind, unless he really *was* that big in solid state."

"You mean you couldn't destroy a ship, in your funnel-cloud form?"

"O mortal, I could destroy a ship—but it would be a lot more difficult than it looked from the outside. If it were easy, I assure you that there would be very few vessels left on the ocean! An ifrit in that shape is invisible. What he has to do is exert himself to start the air moving and circling about. Once he gets it going, he can increase the velocity bit by bit and make the whole affair larger, until water or sand is sucked up and mortals can look upon him. If he moves over a ship *then*, he can do much damage while he has his

inertia going for him."

"His what?"

"You wouldn't understand. Just think of it as one of the magical attributes. Inertia. Anyway, it does take pretty careful preparation to accomplish something spectacular, like the destruction of a ship, and I want you to appreciate that."

"O Dahnash, I do!" Hasan said, and did.

"The water ifrits have some success with great circles of liquid that suck down everything on the surface of the sea. Same principle. And you should see the spectaculars put on by some of the earth-ifrits! I don't know how they do it, but they come up with cones of fire, red-hot rock, and sometimes they shake the ground so hard the houses of mortals fall down. What sport! I tell you, not in thousands of years will your kind avail against such things!"

Hasan was silent, impressed in spite of this conviction that the ifrit exaggerated considerably. So much of what he had been told about the magical realms was exaggerated. He had heard no angels singing, for example.

Time passed. The ifrit landed once, upon request, to allow Hasan a rest-stop and some food, then resumed the long flight. The day darkened, and still the flight continued. Hasan clung as well as he could and hoped sleep would not tumble him off.

"Where are the angels?" he inquired, hoping the conversation would keep him alert.

"Mortal, it isn't safe to fly that high. I'd be incinerated and dashed to the ground long before I reached heaven."

"I thought you were immortal."

"I am—but that doesn't mean I can break the rules. Haven't you seen the

shooting light of chastened ifrits being abolished from heaven? Just a flash in the night, and they're gone. They live—but not as flying ifrits any more, you can be sure. The smart ones stay well within the three-mile limit."

Hasan *had* seen the occasional streaks among the stars on cloudless nights. It was amazing the way everything fell into place, once he understood the causes.

"You said there were *three* intelligent species on earth," he said, remembering another little mystery. "You've told me about the angels and the jinn—"

Dahnash laughed and laughed. "Ho mortal—if you don't know, I am not the one to tell you!"

Hasan was not so easily put off. "Can the third species fly?"

"No, mortal."

"Can it perform feats of magic?"

"Very little—and most of those are illusion."

"Are there many around?"

"Very many."

"What can this species do?"

"It can reproduce, mortal—that's why there are so many. Ho ho!"

Hasan was frustrated by the ifrit's too-obvious satisfaction. "It doesn't sound like anything worthwhile to me," he said.

"My opinion exactly, mortal!" Dahnash laughed. And laughed.

In the morning the ifrit landed in the middle of a white desert. He set Hasan down, still chuckling, and departed. For a moment Hasan thought he saw a funnel rising in the air, but it was gone immediately with a faint "Ho ho!"

He was on his own again.

He hiked, foraging what he could from the land and bearing directly toward the rising sun. The hills were gentle and

rolling, and as he marched the land became flat, and was cultivated extensively with rice. Some of the dwindling hills were terraced, with more rice growing on the additional levels.

At length he arrived at the city. It was a handsome one, whose architecture differed from everything he had encountered before and whose people were yellow-skinned. They spoke a language totally different from his, as he discovered when challenged at the gate.

"The King—I want to see the King," he said, waving the scroll; but they were as mystified about his meaning as he was about theirs.

For a time he was afraid they would slay him or imprison him as a stranger, and felt nervously for the pouch with the fire and incense to summon the shaykh. But surely the man had known about such difficulties, and would not have sent Hasan hither unless he also knew they would be resolved. What was obvious to a magician was seldom obvious to Hasan, but determination and on-the-spot ingenuity had prevailed so far.

This time he did not overcome the problem. The people of the city did. They brought a translator.

"What is your business here?" the yellow man inquired, once he settled upon Hasan's dialect.

"I must see the King. I have a message from the Shaykh Abu al-Ruwaysh."

The man nodded. He recognized the name. After due formalities Hasan was ushered into the presence of King Hassun, Lord of the Land of Camphor. At least, that was the way Hasan understood the title. It appeared to suffer somewhat in translation.

"So you come from the mighty sage of the mountain, the Father of Feathers," the King said. Again Hasan wondered

how much distortion was engendered by the indirect mode of communication. "A wise man, He sent a letter?"

Hasan gave him the scroll.

The King read it with interest, shaking his head. It was in the King's language; Hasan had peeked, and seen the peculiar paint-brush symbols resembling those on Uncle Ab's stolen door.

The King looked up. "Take this youth to the lodge of hospitality," he said.

For three days Hasan resided in the guest-house, royally treated and fed delightfully exotic meals. He told his entire story to the King, who was suitably amazed to converse thus with a citizen of a country so far removed from civilization.

On the fourth day they discussed Hasan's mission. "O traveler," said the King, "you come to me seeking to enter the Isles of Wak, as the shaykh of shaykhs advises me. I would send you there today—but on the way are many perils and many terrors, and I am afraid you go only to your death."

"O King—I must go, for my wife and sons are there."

"So I understand. We certainly comprehend the ties of the family. Have patience; I shall help you in whatever humble way I can. I have devised a plan that at least gives you an even chance, and that is the best I can do, even for the sake of the venerable Abu al-Ruwaysh, whom I would dislike to disappoint."

Hasan bowed down before him. "Thank you, thank you, O auspicious King!"

"I am not certain I am doing you any favor," the King said sadly. "But since you insist upon this adventure I will put you on a ship going in the direction of the Isles. I would take you to Wak myself—but although I have a mighty

host of fighting-men, I can not hope to prevail against the forces of Wak. You will have to enter surreptitiously."

"Only tell me what to do," Hasan said, undismayed.

"I will place you on board with a note in my own hand designating you as a clansman of mine, so that no one will interfere with you. But my protection ends the moment you leave the ship, for it sails beyond my domain, and my name cannot help you at Wak. Now as soon as the captain bids you to land, go ashore, for this will be your closest approach to the Isles. You will see a multitude of wooden settles on the beach. Choose one, crouch under it, and do not stir a muscle. When dark night sets in you will see an army of women appear and flock about the goods, for this is the way we trade with that empire. One of them will sit upon the settle you have chosen. Then you must put forth your hand to her and implore her protection. And know, O traveler, that if she accords you her protection, you stand an excellent chance of continuing your quest; but if she refuses, you are a dad man. You are risking your life, and will probably lose it, and I can do no more for you—but Allah (here the translator considerably supplied Hasan's word for God) has smiled on you so far, or you never would have achieved this much. Perhaps he will smile again."

"O mighty and puissant King, when are the ships coming here?"

"It will be a month, and it will take time for them to complete their business here; but you are welcome to stay with me that time."

Hasan thanked him and spent a pleasant month in the Land of Camphor, learning something of its language and custom.

He also strained to remember the speech of Wak that he had learned from Sana, and improved upon his knowledge of it by studying with a linguist who spoke it. His experience with the King had impressed upon him the need to know other tongues than his own.

The ships arrived, among them one huge vessel with four masts, enormous square sails reinforced by horizontal rods of bamboo spaced every two feet, and sixty tiny cabins, each sufficient living-quarter for a single merchant. The sides of the boat were brightly painted, and the whole affair was spectacular and quite entertaining to the stranger. Hasan was unable to count the number of people upon it; there were hundreds.

The days of unloading and reloading were interminable, for these traders did not rush things, and put protocol before convenience. Hasan stamped fretfully around the docks, unable either to wait or to hurry up the process. At last the King sent for him, gave him attractive gifts, and equipped him with the things he needed.

Next the King summoned the captain of the largest ship. "Take this youth with you in your ship, but do not let any man know he is there or what his purpose is. Put him ashore where you trade with the amazons of Wak, and leave him there."

"Leave him there! Is your beadsman ill, that you must resort to this manner of execution?"

"This is no convict, Captain, but an honored guest, who desires to travel to Wak."

The captain looked at Hasan and blew out his mustache. "To hear is to obey," he said doubtfully.

"And Hasan," said the King. "Don't tell anyone aboard anything about yourself, in case someone sees you. If news

of your mission preceded you to Wak—"

Hasan agreed wholeheartedly. He made his farewell to the King, who wished him the best and committed him to the care of the captain. The captain put him in a chest, loaded it into a dinghy, and hauled it aboard the ship while the crewmen were busy preparing for the voyage. No one doubted this was special merchandise.

Hasan had the run of the cabin. It hardly seemed larger than a casket. He peeped out to watch the shoreline pass, and was reminded of the time so long ago when he had been a captive on his way to Serendip. Phenomenal adventure had waited for him there. Would it be the same this time—or worse?

The days went by; Hasan lost count at ten. At length the fleet of ships bove to in a natural harbor with a long white beach lined with a number of ornate benches, or wooden couches, all unoccupied. The crewmen conveyed the trading goods ashore and picked up, in return, certain other goods waiting on the beach, while the captain ferried Hasan quietly ashore. The men returned to the ships; the vessels set sail, and Hasan was left once more to his own devices.

Chapter Eight

Hasan walked along the beach from chair to chair, noting the workmanship and splendor of each. He would have to hide under one of these—and upon his choice depended his life, not to mention the success of his mission. There were hundreds of them; how could he locate the proper one? Was there a proper one?

Some settles were larger and finer than others. He had to assume that this was an accurate indication of importance. The commanding general should have the

most elaborate one of all. Should he select an insignificant chair on the theory that its owner might be young and sympathetic? Or a fancy one, knowing that its occupant would have more power?

A young woman might agree to help him more readily, but probably wouldn't have the authority to do much. The moment her superiors found out, he would be lost. And, possibly, she would be jealous once she learned his mission. A veteran would be much harder to move, on the other hand. She would be capable of killing him outright. The leaders of armies were callous creatures.

Dusk was falling. He had to make his decision soon, before the women came, or he would be lost before he started. Already he heard a distant clamor. They were here!

He ran pell-mell for the mightiest chair, a veritable throne, and thrust himself under it.

The noise increased. Hasan peeked out from his hiding place and saw a multitude of warriors approaching, wearing strangely-wrapped garments and unusual helmets and swords. This was the fabulous army of women he had been told about!

They spied the merchandise on the beach and gathered about it with delighted exclamations. Warrior-women were still women, Hasan reflected; the strangeness was only in his own view.

After a while their lights ceased to move and bob, and the women came to their chairs to rest. One seated herself upon the settle under which he crouched, and he knew his moment had come. He offered a silent prayer to Allah and grasped the hem of her garment.

"What is this?" the woman exclaimed in the Wak language, and he was thankful

for his recent practice in it.

He crawled out and threw himself to the ground before her. "O Amazon!" he cried. "Your protection! Your goodwill!"

"Who are you? Stand up and let me look at you." Her voice was sharp with command, though he could not see her face. This was a leader, without a doubt.

Hasan stood up. "O my mistress! I throw myself under your protection."

She peered at him in the light of her torch. "Why—you're a man. Don't you know we kill any man who sets foot in our camp?"

"Have pity on one who is parted from his people and his wife and his children! I have traveled across the world to rejoin them, risking my life and my soul for their sake. I beg for your help—otherwise all is lost."

The merchant-warriors in the neighboring chairs turned to see him standing there. "Get out of sight before they learn you are a man," she whispered harshly. "They'll kill you if they find out. Hide where you were."

Hasan immediately crawled under the settle again. "Mind—" the woman said, to the air but loudly enough for him to hear, "I have not decided what to do with you yet. I want to hear your story first. Stay there until morning; after that I'll transport you to my tent."

"O my mistress! Thank you, thank you!"

"Don't get effusive. I may have to kill you anyway."

She stood up and went down the beach, as did the other women. They lighted new torches—flambeaux of wax mixed with aloes-wood and perfume and crude ambergris—and passed the night in celebration, while Hasan watched and slept fitfully and wondered what was to come.

At dawn his benefactress returned with an armful of clothing. "Put this on," she said. "Hurry."

Hasan stood up and donned a light jacket of mail, a helmet, a clasped girdle and footwear that was obviously intended for no man. The armor was certainly shaped to other specifications than his, and quite uncomfortable. He slung the sword over his shoulder so that it hung under his armpit, and took the spear in his hand.

"Cover your face," she directed. "Your shape is had enough—but no amazon wears a beard on her chin."

Hasan had seen that the amazons also did not wear veils, but he was hardly in a position to argue the matter.

"Now follow me," she said. "Don't say a word—your barbarous accent would destroy you."

It was not light yet. Hasan both hessed the murk for the concealment it offered and cursed it for making it so difficult to distinguish his benefactress amidst the troops. He didn't even know her name, and hadn't seen enough of her face to make it recognizable.

The armed women crowded around him as they followed a narrow road from the beach; severe campaigners alternating with lovely young first-termers. They chatted and joked with considerable crudity, and humped into each other and himself, causing him much apprehension. Even if he had not been fearful of discovery, he would not have enjoyed the company of such masculinely attired women. The mail suits suppressed their charms considerably, both physical and intellectual.

They approached the amazon camp. Military tents were pitched amid the trees, each carefully pegged and ditched to keep out insects and water. The women

dispersed, each to her own tent. Hasan looked around—and could not find his patron!

The aisle between the tents was almost deserted now. He wandered along, uncertain what to do. He couldn't just stand outside—the sentries would notice. But how could he risk entering the wrong tent?

He offered up another silent prayer and headed for the largest tent. This was his only chance. He entered.

The woman inside had thrown down her arms and was lifting off her mail. She paused as she saw Hasan, and he paused too, ready to bolt.

"Come in before someone sees you, young man," she snapped. It was the right tent!

She finished drawing off her armor, and Hasan did likewise, glad to get out of the pinchy and bulgy costume. They faced each other in the light of the interior lamp.

Hasan had not known what to expect in his companion, but he was nevertheless disappointed. She was a grizzled old woman with straggly hair, wrinkled eyes, bald eyebrows; gap-toothed, big-nosed and hoary-headed. Her face was a pockmarked calamity, but her body rivaled it for ugliness, with limbs like dry sticks and breasts like empty pouches.

They conversed. She was commander-in-chief of the amazon army with a name and title he found difficult to pronounce or comprehend. He settled upon an adaptation he could remember: Shawahi the Fascinator, Mother of Calamities. "The calamities are visited upon the foe, despite appearances," she reassured him. "Now tell me who you are and how you came to this country, for I can plainly see you are a stranger."

Hasan summarized his story for her. He

had told it to so many people in the course of this journey that it was beginning to sound uninteresting. He refrained from adding embellishments, however; he wasn't trying to impress this woman, but to obtain her protection and help.

"A princess of Wak?" she repeated, and sniffed. "Every peasant-girl is a princess when she meets a handsome stranger. I daresay we can run her down without involving the court."

It had not occurred to Hasan that Sana might be less than she had claimed—hut of course she *hadn't* claimed to be a princess. Rose had read it in a book, and he had never questioned it. Sana had come accompanied by servants, and was so obviously highborn that—

It didn't matter. He had married her for her beauty, not her royalty. "Whatever she is," he said, "I beg of you—help me find her. Otherwise I shall surely die."

"Don't worry, lad," the crone said. "I like you, and I have decided to help you to achieve your desire. You are fortunate you encountered me, because no one else would have helped you." And she questioned him closely on the details of his story.

Hasan answered with complete openness, but remained nervous. At last she was satisfied. "I will show you how I will help you, O my son," she said. Hasan's distress abated; by addressing him as "son" she had indicated that her own interest in him was compassionate rather than romantic. This was a necessary reassurance, for he had heard tales....

Shawahi clapped her hands. Young attendants appeared at the front of the tent. "Summon the captains of the army to my presence," she said.

The captains came and stood before

her. "Go out and proclaim to all the troops that they shall assemble tomorrow at daybreak. Let no one stay behind, for she who tarries shall be slain."

"We bear and obey," they replied.

All day Shawahi gave directions and organized the army for travel. The goods were packed and loaded on beasts of burden, and food for the journey was hunted, prepared and stored. Hasan ascertained this by the sounds about him, since he never left the tent.

At dusk Shawahi rejoined him. "I am not a practicing Buddhist," she said, "for the religion of peace is difficult for warriors and the royal-born. Yet I would solve your problem without violence if I could. It would not be easy for you to recover a girl from Wak itself."

Hasan had many questions, for he knew nothing of this religion to which she didn't belong, yet disliked thinking of her as an infidel. He wondered what her plan was. But he held back his queries and accepted the mat she laid out for him in the corner of the tent. She had agreed to help; that was enough, for now.

At dawn the troops assembled. Shawahi made Hasan dress in an all-enveloping sbawl, with a kerchief over his face so that nothing showed but his eyes. "Now I want you to stand beside me and tell me if you recognize your wife among my girls, for it is possible that she is among them," she said.

"But how shall I know her, in armor?"

The old woman smiled. "Perhaps they will remove some of it," she said. "Come."

Hasan followed her to the beach, where she sat upon her settle and bade him stand beside it. The captains shouted orders and the troops moved, unit by unit, past them and down toward the

water. There each woman removed her armor and the rest of her apparel and went into the water to bathe. Naked, buxom girls paraded before him in all their natural charm.

Hasan concealed his astonishment, knowing that the amazons never would have exposed themselves in his presence had they suspected his identity. They washed their fair skins and frolicked in the water, no longer the tough warriors he had seen before. It was amazing how much of a woman's pretensions vanished with her clothing! These damsels were beautiful; clean of limb and firm of breast, with long dark hair streaming down their backs.

Hasan studied them closely, trying to recognize the face and feature of his beloved ... but the sight of their nudity and the soft and rounded decorations between their prancing thighs filled him with a tremendous desire.

Shawahi chuckled. She was watching him, not her amazons. "They have attractive ... faces, don't they, Hasan?"

"They—yes," he agreed, embarrassed. "But I don't see my wife among them."

Shawahi signaled, and the first company emerged from the water and marched, naked, directly in front of the settle, on their way back to their armor and camp. Hasan found it painful to stand still—but none of these was Sana.

All morning the amazons bathed and marched past him; but though each company seemed more remarkable than the last, and his gaze lingered increasingly on the flexing buttocks retreating toward the tents, his disappointment grew as he despaired of finding his wife among them.

At last the officers bathed. Most of these were less attractive than the lower-ranking girls, but there was one among

them who stood out like the moon among stars. She had many waiting-women, and entered the water in the company of slavegirls of surpassing beauty. She fell to splashing and ducking them, while they did not dare return the gesture, and Hasan felt hot tears or remembrance come to his eyes as he remembered his first vision of the bird-maiden and her sport in the pool.

"This girl is very like my wife," he murmured, admiring her high bosom and broad thighs as she came from the water to don precious ornaments and clothing threaded with gold.

"Ah—have you recognized her, then?" Shawahi inquired.

"No, O my lady—this is not my wife, nor have I ever seen this damsel before. For a moment her grace and symmetry suggested the appearance of my wife, but not one of these girls is her like."

The old woman frowned. "Describe her to me, then. I know every girl in the Isles of Wak, for all are required to serve under me before taking husbands. Perhaps I will know her from your description."

"My wife has the fairest face and form of grace," he said, plunging into the task with enthusiasm. "Her cheeks are smooth and her breasts are high; her calves and thighs are plump to the sight and her teeth snowy white, her speech a delight; her gifts are moral and her lips red coral—"

"Are you quoting something?"

Hasan flushed. "We of Arabia get poetic when emotion overcomes us," he admitted. "When I bring to mind the imagery of my love—anyway, on her right cheek is a mole, and there is a sign on her waist under her navel. Her waist is so small her hips seem to be a heavy weight. Her face is brighter than the moon and the touch of her lips is a draught from the

fountains of paradise."

Shawahi's eyes narrowed speculatively. "Now give me a detailed account," she said.

Hasan obliged, while the damsel before the water dressed in leisurely fashion. When he finished, the old woman bowed her head.

"I would have been happier without this knowledge," she said. "I recognize this woman by her description."

"O Pilgrimess! You know her!"

"I know her—but this is no cause to rejoice. Of all the women it might have been, this is the worst. For you have described the eldest daughter of the Supreme King of Wak."

"Yes—I told you she was a princess!"

"If I had believed you, I would never have agreed to help," the old woman said bitterly. "I allowed for youthful exaggeration. That was a mistake." She faced Hasan, her knowledgeable eyes boring into his. "Now listen, young man. If you're asleep, wake up. If this woman is indeed your wife, it is impossible for you ever to obtain her. If you came to her somehow, you still could not possess her, because the distance between your station and hers is the distance between earth and heaven. If you even attempt to win her, your life and the lives of all who help you will be forfeit."

Hasan was plunged into despair. "O my lady—how shall I turn my back now, after coming this far? I never thought you would forsake me like this!"

"O my son—believe me, if you persist in this quest you can only sacrifice your life. Go home; you are too handsome to die like this! You have seen all the girls of my army naked. Tell me which of them pleases you, and I will give her to you in lieu of your wife, and you can return to your country in safety and comfort. That

damsel lingering on the beach—surely she is to your liking? She is of royal blood herself, and—"

But Hasan hung his head and would not be consoled. "I can not live with any but my beloved," he said. "And my sons."

Shawahi sighed. "I don't know what I'm going to do. If I take you before the Queen you say is yours, I will lose my own life as well, because she will blame me for admitting you to her hands, and her wrath is terrible. I will give you a fortune in treasure and fair women, if you will only reconsider."

"I don't want anything but my wife and children," Hasan said.

Shawahi saw that it was no use. "This is death for both of us," she said, "but I will take you to the Queen."

Hasan started to thank her, but thought the better of it. She did not want thanks; she was only honoring the letter of her promise to assist him.

"This, then, is the journey lying before us," she told him. "From here to the chief city of Wak is a distance by foot of seven months. We fare first to the Land of the Ferals, where tigers and bears and corcodiles and all manner of fearsome creatures prowl. Then we travel on to the Land of the Birds, where the noise of their wings and screeching scarcely allows anyone to talk or sleep. After that we come to a third country, the Land of the Jinn, where our ears are deafened by their cries and our eyes blinded by the sparks and fire of their mouths. At last we approach the main section of Wak, the largest island, and cross a mighty river and pass an enormous mountain, Mount Wak, where a tree grows which bears fruits like the heads of the sons of Adam. When the sun rises on them the heads cry out 'Wak! Wak!' and at sundown they cry

out again. And yet these things are nothing compared to the power and wrath of the Queen when she finds out—" she broke off shuddering.

The empire of Wak extended far beyond the seven principle islands. Hasan had been landed at its farthest extremity, just south of the Khmer empire that lay between them and the Land of Camphor. Their route would skirt the Khmer demesnes and circle a great sea bordering the long northern peninsula that reached down toward Wak itself.

They marched. The soil underfoot abruptly changed to deep, bright red, as though a dragon had been slain and bled of its vengeful life directly into the earth. They kept mainly to the shore, following the white sandy beaches whenever possible.

Giant mangrove trees thrived here. At flood tide only the trunks and crowns showed in the water, but during the ebb the bizarre prop-root structures were exposed, three to five feet long and converging upward toward the stem. Individual sections stuck out of the mud, going nowhere.

The serpentine coastline wound in and out, fringed with forested islands and mangrove swamps. Hasan hardly knew which direction he was going, because their route seemed to bear in all directions. He knew he could never have negotiated this country by himself.

The land near the shore was fairly level, but he could see tall mountains rising inland. Rivers came from them to the sea, edged thickly by bamboo forests and more sparsely by coconut palms, papayas and banana plants. Elsewhere the trees were bare; carpets of brown leaves many inches deep covered the forest floor.

"Why are all the trees dying?" Hasan

wanted to know.

Shawahi laughed and explained that it was the dry season, when the parched forests lost their foliage. "Things will change when the monsoon comes," she said. "And we'd better be across the plain before it does."

"But the rains bring no harm."

"Stranger, trust me to know my business. After the rains come the floods. All the plain is covered with dirty water, a sea of it, with nothing but sugar-palms rising out of it to show where the land was. You can't even tell where the salt ocean begins. The native houses are built on stilts to keep them dry—but we are on foot. It would not be very comfortable traveling."

Hasan shut up, chastened. Still, he maintained a certain skepticism, until such time as he saw such a wonder for himself. He has seen floods in Bassorah, but nothing on this order.

They entered the land of ferals. Hasan was disappointed; its appearance was much the same as what he had already seen. But of course he should have expected the animals to be in scant supply during the dry season, and should be thankful for it.

Yet why did reality always turn out to be so much less than anticipation?

He kept his eyes open and did see animals—elephants, bears, boars, monkeys and a solitary tiger. Deer bounded away on sight, and a jackal skulked after the party, scavenging for their remains. There were crocodiles and turtles in the rivers, and at night the sharp-pointed porcupines roved among the trees. Rats were common, and their prettier cousins, the squirrels. Several times he saw lithe black panthers, and of course there were many snakes of all sizes.

He suspected that the land of ferals would be much more dangerous for an individual traveler. As it was, in the midst of an armed party of many hundreds, the trip was dull.

They crossed the plains. The outlines of the mountains faded far to the north and the land became level and monotonous. Drowsing huffaloes stood near the water, the helpful weaver-birds picking parasites out of their fur. There were villages here: the clusters of houses were indeed on stilts, and the little island-like collections of dwellings were surrounded by hunches of thorny bamboo and palms.

Shawahi took the party through one village, stopping for supplies, and Hasan got a closer look at the natives and their way of life. The huts were fashioned of hamhoo and grass, with peaked roofs of matted hay, and stood three or four feet above the ground. The men wore the phanung: a long wide cloth wrapped around the body from waist to knees, with the two ends passed between the legs and tucked into the waist in back to form serviceable pantaloons. The women wore tunic-like dresses, colorful turbans and silver rings around their necks. Little boats were in the water, with domes over their decks like barrels laid sidewise.

The market-place both fascinated and repulsed Hasan. There was none of the vociferous bargaining he was accustomed to. The shopper either paid the price of he didn't; the shopkeeper didn't seem to care. How could anyone do business that way? Later he was to realize that much of what he took to be indifference was in reality the extreme politeness of the people here, and come to appreciate this quality very much; but this first experience left him cold.

The floors were covered with fresh fruit and vegetables. There had to be some

cultivation in spite of the dry season, Hasan thought. Did they irrigate? Bright green cone-shaped lotus-pods stood in piled pyramids. Flattened dried frogs were pressed together in bunches. Turtle eggs and edible lizards were displayed, together with pugnacious live crabs and even live octopuses squatting in howls of water.

Some food was already prepared: octopus entrails and tentacles served as a side dish to steaming boiled rice. Hasan looked at the obvious suction-pads and moved on, unhungry.

Some of the young village girls wore fancy belts under their blouses. "The quality of the belt shows her value on the marriage market," Shawahi explained. "Good system." Hasan agreed.

That night Shawahi treated him to a special delicacy of the region: a royal fruit called the durian. It was green and thorned on the outside, almost the size of a man's head. She cut it open to expose the creamy meat inside and an odor of garlic, rotten cheese and camel-urine wafted up. She handed a thick slice to him. "Eat your fill, Hasan—you will seldom get to feast on a delight like this!" she said mischievously, while Hasan gagged on the stench and eyed the brain-like convolutions of the surface.

Shawahi ate with gusto. "You'll find it melts in your mouth," she said, cutting a second slice from the large center fruit stone. "Isn't this an unforgettable experience?"

Hasan agreed wanly.

Egrets rose lazily as the army marched from the village, and hawks circled high overhead. There were cities along their route, but Shawahi intended to avoid these. Next was the land of birds.

Hasan wondered whether his mouth would feel clean by the time they reached

it.

He was thoroughly weary of the plain by the time they reached the forested mountains. Though the sun beat down mercilessly, there were signs of change. The monsoon season was approaching.

The transition was abrupt. Suddenly they were in the thickest and rankest rainforest Hasan had ever seen. Here grew the gigantic yang trees: the enormous trunks branchless for well over a hundred feet, topped by broad crowns of small, leathery leaves. Bamboos were the size of trees, seventy-five feet tall with culms a foot in diameter. A handsome tree with long, narrow silver-green leaves bore greenish-yellow flowers on stems sprouting directly from the trunk. The undersides of the leaves were reddish. Hasan studied it and was reminded of Serendip; then it occurred to him that this could be the tree that bore the durian fruit, and he lost interest.

The party plodded single file through the jungle along narrow trails shut in by walls of green. Herbs and shrubs rose up to great heights, and sizable tree-trunks stood close together. Elephants made these trails, Shawahi explained; they were indefatigable path-makers, contouring them around peaks and along valleys.

"A rhinoceros will try to burrow under tangled vegetation," she said, "rather than walk over it. But the elephant is at home in the forest. It can go anywhere a man can go, and we are not too proud to use the good trails it leaves for us."

Hasan looked at the deep growth of climbing and twisting plants surrounding many of the trunks and festooning the spaces between them, and was glad she felt that way.

Broken tree-trunks lay on the ground,

and some dead trees were so entangled they could not fall. They leaned, defunct and rotting, upon other trees. Luxuriant moss covered these, and from this moss sprang beautifully colored orchids. Cup-shaped palms grew where they could, and so did the tree-ferns. The upper foliage of the forest was so dense that it was impossible to see the sky from the ground. Only occasionally did the canopy part to admit the blinding sunshine, which reflected from the shiny surfaces of the lower leaves. The forest air was humid and musty—a hothouse of solid greens.

This was the land of birds. Near the water were small white egrets, storks and ibises. Hasan stood at the edge of a brook, where the sunlight fell from the side and made every leaf turn toward it, and watched a redheaded crane take off from behind a tree-trunk bridge. The bird was almost as tall as he was, standing, with uniform gray plumage and a bright, wine-red head.

The birds of the forest were much prettier than those of the plain and swamp. There were brilliant kingfishers, flocks of noisy green parakeets, and jungle hens with rusty red feathers and a metallic sheen in the tail. There were pheasants, crows, falcons and buzzards; peacocks perched over the streams, and the pied hornbill was frighteningly large in flight. Hasan's favorite was what he learned was the long-tailed broadbill: it had a green back, yellow throat, blue tail, and a black cap with a bush of blue and yellow feathers. Shawahi also pointed out the small swifts, from whose nests soup was made.

But birds were hardly the only creatures here. The jungle resounded with the calls of unseen animals and the chatter of families of gibbons. The shrill mass-chirping of the cicadas began at

dawn and filled the air until the hottest part of the day. Then it stopped—no one begrudged the insects a rest—and began again in the afternoon until it reached a deafening crescendo at dusk. Even at night it did not stop; the noise abated only gradually as the hours of darkness passed.

The mountainsides were steep, and high up Hasan encountered nests of sticks half the height of a man. No, not for birds—these were built by wild pigs to protect their burrows from predators. Flying lizards moved between the trees, and bats appeared in every size. "Wait until you see the flying centipedes of Wak," Shawahi said.

Hasan had thought he had seen the most spectacular refuge of wildlife and wilderness in Serendip. Now he realized that there was a great deal yet to appreciate.

The monsoon came as they crossed the valley between the long mountain ranges, to the western side of the peninsula. The rains beat down with devastating force, drenching everything with elemental savagery. This was one of the wettest spots in the world, Shawahi said, and Hasan believed it.

They moved on south, day by day. Brilliant flowers were everywhere. Plants climbed trees, reached up through the crowns and out into the sun. Some plants even lived in the high foliage entirely, with their roots dangling in the air below. Butterflies fluttered about, and even fish climbed trees.

Land appeared across the ocean to the south. This was the major island of Wak itself—the land where Hasan was to meet his fate.

They crossed in long double-hulled boats, the amazons taking paddles and rowing vigorously in their enthusiasm to

be home. All day they rowed, and did not touch land again until night; Hasan was glad there was no storm that day, for the ocean seemed exceedingly wide and deep from such tiny craft.

They landed; but the journey was hardly over yet. They had yet to traverse the land of the jinn.

Great mountains lay to the south and west. The countryside did not seem to change, except for one notable feature: the top of the largest mountain they passed was white. Hasan remembered this effect from the mountain of the black Shaykh.

"What's the matter with that peak?" he demanded, gesturing.

Shawahi smiled. "That is snow."

Hasan figeted in the heat, looking for the joke. "But snow is cold."

She nodded agreeably.

Hasan gave up. Evidently he was missing something again.

They marched inland now, through thick forest. Animals and birds of every description were present, and Hasan gaped at bamboo stalks over two feet thick, and fly-covered flowers the same size. The soil was uncommonly rich and black, but still—!

At night he woke with a shock: the ground was shaking! "What's happening?" he shouted.

"Go back to sleep, lad," Shawahi mumbled. "I told you this was the land of the jinn."

The jinn! So it was true. The flying ifrit Dahnash had said that the demons of the earth could shake the ground....

"Do they really make cones of fire?"

"Of course," the old woman said. "Go to sleep."

"How can I sleep when the jinn are walking?"

Shawahi sat up. "Listen, Hasan—all that a man needs for happiness is a horse, a knife, a wife and a singing bird. That's a proverb of ours. Worry about your wife. That's all you're missing. You don't need to concern yourself about the doings of the fire-spirits. You'll see enough of that tomorrow. Now *sleep*."

Somehow he wasn't reassured.

In the morning they marched uphill. The jungle opened out and they stood before a ragged mountain of ominous appearance. "That's your cone," Shawahi said. "One of the largest in Wak. See—there's a little fire now."

Hasan looked anxiously. The top of the mountain leveled off, and above it was a cloud of smoke. As he watched, an expanding ball of blackness puffed up from the mountain itself.

"That's really a ball of steam and ashes," the old woman said. "Just a little innocent practice. Sometimes Magma is angry; then the fire shoots out and the ashes fall everywhere, and the terrible burning rock flows down the side. When that happens, you must get as far away as you can." She smiled reminiscently. "But it doesn't happen often."

"Magma? Who is—?"

"Magma is the marid of the mountain. You haven't seen power until you've seen a marid in action. But don't be alarmed—our temple to Buddha is nearby, and while the holy men hardly serve the marid, there seems to be a pacifying influence."

"What kind of temple does—Buddha—have?" Hasan was still curious about this strange religion that never faced Mekkeh.

"You'll see it when we pass beyond the mountain. There are holy relics and the sacred ashes of our dead. You can hear the bells for many miles, and it is a

sanctuary for all who are in need."

"But why so far from your cities? You said we still have to travel many—"

"Buddha loved the forest. A tree may be as holy as a temple. Isn't that true in your land?"

Hasan shook his head, amazed. "And Buddha permits a marid to menace the temple?"

"Buddha is tolerant," she said simply. "Even the jinn have the right to seek destiny in their own fashion."

He found it hard to comprehend such an attitude. But in a land where mountains bore snow in the heat or belched fire from their summits, strange beliefs had to be expected. Or were the jinn so powerful in their own land that even a god—an *infidel* god, he corrected himself mentally—had to defer to them?

Whatever the situation, he had a nasty premonition that the fire-demons, large and small, would not stay pacified until his quest was over.

Yet the old woman hardly seemed to be concerned about such things. Instead she worried about the reaction of the Queen. If the Queen of Wak were really Sana, his wife, why should there be such concern? He knew Sana did not have the heart for vengeful measures. She had seldom been able even to reprimand a household slave. Whatever her reputation might be here, he was confident that once he found her and talked with her, she would agree to come back to Baghdad with him.

Shawahi had said that the woman he described as his wife was the Queen—but somehow the personalities were entirely different. How could this terrible Queen be his wife—and if she were not, where was his wife? Surely there could not be two on earth like her.

As Hasan's journey neared its conclusion, his apprehension and concern

increased. Something was wrong.

Chapter Nine

The house was large and strange to Hasan, though he had learned to take strangeness as a matter of course. Its timbers were of dark hard wood, much of it carved and painted in intriguing artistry, and suspended mats of bamboo formed certain walls and the peaked ceiling. From the outside he could see that the structure was square at the base and topped by a fantastic sway-backed thatch that curved up into a decorated pinnacle at either end. The roof reminded him of the saddle of a giant—but he would not have cared to be the giant who bestrode so knifelike a support.

"O my mother!" Hasan exclaimed as Shawahi entered. "What did she say?"

She eased herself into a seated posture, looking old. "O wretched man, would I had never seen your face."

Hasan stood back despondently. "The Queen is not my wife?"

"Hasan, I would do a ritual dance for joy that would rattle my brittle bones apart if I were only certain that she was not."

"Then she is my beloved!"

Shawahi fixed him with a dour stare. "O ill-fated one, be silent and hear my story."

Perplexed, Hasan sat down and listened.

Shawahi left her house (she narrated) in the morning with bitter forboding. She had brought the foolish youth, Hasan, into the city disguised as a handmaiden—indeed, the fairness of his complexion assisted the subterfuge—and hidden him in a room apart, lest any should come to know of him and inform the Queen and bring the stroke of the

sword upon them both, and she hoped he appreciated this properly. She had served him herself while striving to instill in him the fear of the awful majesty of the Supreme King, the father of this woman he claimed as wife, but he had wept before her most pitiously and said "O my lady, I choose death for myself and loathe this worldly life, if I unite not with my wife and children: I have set my existence on this venture and will either attain my aim or die."

What could a tired old woman do in the face of an attitude like that? A lover never harkened to the speech of one who was fancy-free. If he was determined to throw his life away, she would simply have to cast about for some way to make it less suicidal. Thus she repaired to the Queen with her mind tumbling with abasements and petitions, hoping that the royal heart might in some way be softened.

The Queen was the eldest daughter of the Supreme King, who had put her in charge of the state while he visited with his six remaining daughters, all virgin maidens. The Queen had absolute power here in her city; but Shawahi had a claim upon her favor because she had reared all the King's daughters and trained them in weaponry and tactics until they were the finest of amazon warriors. Now she needed all the good-will there might be in store, for the Queen was not going to be pleased with what the old woman had to relate.

Shawahi was admitted readily to the presence, and fell down and kissed the floor before the Queen.

"Come, beldame, rise and sit beside me," the Queen said, embracing her formally. "I haven't seen you in a year. Did you have success in your trading expedition?"

"O my lady, it was a blessed journey,

and I have brought you a gift which I will present to you very soon. But O my daughter, Queen of the age and the time—"

"Speak, woman."

"I have a favor to ask. But it is a delicate matter, and I pray it will not upset you. I hesitate to bring it up—"

"Come, mother—tell me, and I will accomplish it for you. My troops, my kingdom and myself are at your disposition."

But the old woman trembled and quivered like a dry reed in the wind of the monsoon. "O protect me from the wrath of the Queen," she murmured fearfully to herself. Then, to the Queen: "O my lady, a man hid himself under my settle in the North District and begged my protection. He said he was searching for his wife and children, and would die if he found them not. Never have I seen a braver or more handsome man. I tried to discourage him, but—"

"And so you brought him here..." the Queen said softly. "Concealing him carefully from your troops while you kept him in your tent."

"O my lady!"

The Queen contemplated her thoughtfully. "And the favor you crave of me is this: that I now permit this mannequin of yours to achieve his desire."

Shawahi maintained the silence of terror. She knew too well the mannerisms of the Queen.

The storm broke. "O ill-omened beldame! Have you come to such a state of lewdness that you now must sneak strange males to the sacred Isles of Wak and flaunt them before your Queen? Have you no fear of the mischief I should wreak upon your head for such treachery? By the head of my father the King, but for

your service in my youth, I would immediately put both you and this man to the foulest of deaths, and set your corpses beside the gates of the city so that travelers might take dire warning by your fate. O accursed! None dares do the like of this outrageous deed!"

A glimmer of hope lit the old woman's face. The Queen had not stated that she *would* execute them, only that she might. "O mistress of the ages! Surely it behoves your power and generosity to grant this suffering traveler some token. At least give him audience before sending him on his way. He hails from Haghdad, throne city of the Caliph Harun al-Rashid."

"Baghdad? I know of no such city." But Shawahi knew by the subtle nuances of her manner that the Queen did recognize the name.

"O my Queen! It is a rich and powerful empire with armies like the sands of the sea, and Hasan is a prince of—"

"A prince? Then why did he have to beg your aid?"

"A prince of merchants, O my lady." Shawahi was no longer certain how much the Queen knew. Could she actually be Hasan's wife? At any rate, it obviously wasn't safe to try to pass him off as royal born, however helpful that might have been. "All he desires in the world is the recovery of his wife and two sons. A small thing to grant, to one of your—"

"I will be the judge of what is small." But she was interested now. "He has two sons, but sent his wife to Wak? What kind of man is this?"

"He did not send her. She escaped without his notice and flew with her children to Wak, leaving word for him to follow if he desired. And now he is here, having braved the most—"

The Queen cut her off with a gesture. "I don't have time to see him. But his case is

curious, and I will grant him what he says he wants. Summon all the women of the city and parade them before him tomorrow; if he knows his wife among them, I will deliver her to him and send him home with honor."

"But my lady—"

"And if he knows her not in the morning, I will crucify him over your door that very afternoon. Such is my decision."

"And this is the calamity you have brought upon yourself!" Shawahi said to Hasan in conclusion. "Now that the Queen knows of your presence here, there is no escape. Tomorrow you must view the assembled women of the city."

"But that's no calamity. The Queen is helping me."

Shawahi sighed, as she did so often when reasoning with him. "O for the innocence of youth! She has sentenced you to death, Hasan."

"But I can recognize my wife in a moment."

She closed her eyes as though in meditation. "You will view all the women of the city, no more. This city. Do you know how many cities there are in the empire of Wak?"

"Why, I thought—"

"But let's say she is in this one city, of all the hundreds in Wak. What makes you think you'll see her?"

"But you said all the women would be—"

"All but one, Hasan."

He gazed at her, confused. "One?"

"The Queen herself."

"Well yes, you did say my wife was very like the Queen. But—"

"Can there be two like her in all the world?"

"No! No one could match my wife!"

Shawahi spread her hands. "So it is

death."

"I don't understand."

She opened her eyes and stared at him somberly. "The woman you describe as your wife must either be the Queen or one very like her. Believe me, there is none like her in the city. So if she is not your wife, you will not find what you seek among the women of the city tomorrow."

"Well, I suppose not. But—"

"Could the Queen be your wife and not know it?"

"Of course not!"

"Then, if she knows she is the one you seek, why should she set up this parade of damsels? Why condemn you to death for failure—*knowing you must fail?*"

Hasan was shocked. "My beloved would never do that!"

Shawahi looked upon him with the compassion of the very old for the very young. "Hasan, did it ever occur to you that you never knew your wife very well? You loved her for her beauty, heedless of what might lie behind it. You captured her by force and compromised her so that she had to marry you or be forever sullied and ashamed. You held her prisoner in Baghdad while you begot sons upon her. When she had the chance, she fled from you. She never returned to Baghdad or Serendip, though she could easily have flown there in her feather-suit. What makes you think she wants to join you now, or even see your face again?"

"I know she loves me."

"You're likely to carry that touching faith with you to your execution," she said. "Tomorrow afternoon. I know the Queen; I raised her. She is crafty and cruel beyond any in the empire and her heart is a pointed stone."

"That is not my wife."

"Hasan, sometimes I wonder whether your wife exists at all. There is only one

way you can save your life tomorrow. When the women parade before you, pick out the prettiest and claim her as your wife. Bring her to me and I'll beat her until she agrees to do anything you demand. That will satisfy the Queen."

"But if the Queen is my wife, she will know."

"Precisely. If she is not your wife, she won't suspect. If she is, she'll be satisfied to be rid of you, either by marriage or crucifixion. That's the way her mind works."

"I can't do it. I must have my wife and children."

Shawahi gave up. "Never have I seen a man so eager to die!"

In the morning Hasan stood before the palace while all the maidens of the city paraded past, a hundred at a time. The girls treated it as a festive occasion and dressed accordingly. Many of the men of the city lined up beside Hasan to help him peruse the offerings. If he didn't find a wife, some of them might.

Hasan had relinquished his original outland garments and now dressed in accordance with Wak convention. He was outfitted in a tubular length of material would around his waist and reaching almost to the ground, surmounted by a high-collared jacket. On his head was an intricately draped flat turban which made him feel a little more at ease but whose windings were unfamiliar. Now that he was among men dressed similarly, Hasan was glad Shawahi had made him change.

Most of the women on display were dressed in two-piece costumes: a shirt of colorful cloth wound neatly over waist and hips and hanging in folds to the hem just above the bare feet; a long-sleeved blouse. A cummerbund held both in

place. Black hair was brushed back and coiled attractively or tied behind.

Interspersed with this ordinary clothing were the more ornate fineries of the wealthier families: black dresses spangled with gold, set off by elegant scarves worn over the shoulders, and spectacular headdresses. Full length costumes of brightly decorated cloth, sewn with flower-patterns so thick that the color of the underlying material was a matter of conjecture. Dancing-girl costumes cut well beneath the shoulders and draped with stoles of golden thread and jeweled scarves.

Hasan was suitably impressed by the endless glitter and variety of clothing; but what amazed him most was the fact that not a single woman wore a veil. He had naturally assumed that the amazons flouted convention because of their trade, so had become accustomed to their naked countenances. Shawahi had told him that the people of the Empire of Wak neither covered their faces nor called on Allah, but he had been unable to credit this completely until faced with the proof. A damsel's most intimate secret was her face—yet these girls smiled and laughed and disported themselves openly in the full sight of men, unashamed.

Once he got over the shock, he rather enjoyed this quaint naivete.

Many of the young women were fair, and not a few looked his way and smiled, knowing his mission ... but Sana was not among them.

"Are you *sure* you can't select one to call your wife?" Shawahi whispered. "The Queen is growing impatient."

Hasan shook his head, refusing to acknowledge her meaning.

The last of the women passed. Shawahi slowly trekked into the palace.

Hasan waited, not believing that the

Queen could so callously order his death. At least she would have to see him, and if she were his wife—

If she were Sana, and still could execute him, then he had no further need of life.

Palace guards emerged: grim, husky men in polished armor. Their captain approached. "Hasan of Baghdad?"

Hasan nodded. They laid hands upon him and threw him down. His face landed in the dirt so that he had to splutter to spit it out. Guards took hold of his feet, and hauled.

He turned his head aside and covered his face with his hands, but even so the abrasions of dust and sand burned into his cheek.

They were doing it. They were going to kill him.

At the place of execution the guards stood him up, ripped a strip from his skirt, and bound it over his eyes. The last thing he saw was the gleam of naked blades as they ceremoniously flourished their weapons.

In the scant moments remaining, Hasan thought about the circumstances that had summoned him here. Bahram the Persian—how he would have laughed to see this scene! Hasan was glad he had killed the evil magician. Rose—youngest and warmest of the princesses—how she would cry, if ever she knew. Perhaps he should have married her; she would certainly have made an excellent wife. But Sana had come, the beautiful bird-maiden....

No, this was the way it had to be. Sana—or death.

The blow did not strike. What were they waiting for?

"Don't get impatient, imposter," the captain said. "We will accommodate you as soon as the Queen gives her royal

permission."

The Queen was coming here— Surely she would have mercy, if—

Footsteps approached. He heard the soft rustle of skirts, smelled queenly perfume.

"He is ready, Majesty," the captain said.

"Cut off his head." *Sana's voice!* "Tie his corpse over this old crone's door, a warning to any who dare adventure into our country under false pretenses. Proceed." *How could she do this, seeing him?*

Rough hands grasped him again, forcing his head down. "If you move, stranger, the cut will not be clean, and you will die slowly," the captain warned him without emotion. He heard the slight friction of armor as a sword was lifted two-handed above his neck.

"O Queen!" Shawahi's voice cried out, near at hand. "O my lady, by my claim for fosterage, do not be hasty in this matter. This poor wretch is a stranger who has risked his life and traveled from the end of the earth in pursuit of his love. He has suffered what none have suffered before him, and come here only because I promised him safety; and I promised only because of my trust in your magnanimity and your sense of justice and quality of mercy. I would never have brought him here otherwise. I said to myself, 'The Queen will take pleasure in looking upon him, and in hearing him speak his verses, and in his sweet discourse and eloquence, like pearls upon a string.' And he has entered our land and eaten our food, and therefore has a claim upon our hospitality."

A pause, then Shawahi continued. "You can not condemn him until he has seen all our women, for that was your royal word. You are the only one he has

not looked upon. Will you keep your oath and show him your face?"

Sana's voice replied, but with an irony Hasan had never heard in his wife. "How can he be my husband and have had children by me, and I not know it?"

This was the point Shawahi herself had raised to Hasan, but she chose to ignore it this time. "Your word, O Queen. Can you put him to death when the terms have not been honored? Do you want the report to be spread abroad that you hate all strangers and put them to death for no reason? They will call her an evil Queen who is known for such a thing!"

"Your own stringy neck is not far from the sword," the Queen muttered. Then, to the guards: "Unbind his eyes!"

The cruel tourniquet came off. Hasan blinked at the sudden release and light, unable to focus immediately.

"Look at me, stranger, before you die," the Queen said.

Hasan shielded his eyes, squinted, and peered at the royal personage. He saw the elegant, jewel-encrusted robe, the sash of bright exotic weave, the slim lovely arms with their thick silver bracelets, the shining crown, and finally her face.

It was Sana.

Shawahi was holding up his head and cleaning up his face. At first he didn't realize that he had fainted; then it seemed as though a great amount of time had passed. It hadn't; the guards were still standing with blades unlimbered, and Sana had not moved or changed expression.

"If you are satisfied...." she said, turning to the guards. There was no hint of recognition or compassion in her face. She was indifferent to his fate and angry at the delay; that was all.

"But Sana!" he cried, appalled.

One brow arched in a manner never characteristic of his wife. "What is this dog yowling about now?"

"Don't you know me Sana? I'm Hasan—your husband and the father of Nasir and Mansur, your sons. How can you murder me?"

The Queen spoke to Shawahi. "This stranger is jinn-mad. He stares me in the face with wide eyes and says I am his wife!"

Shawahi came instantly to Hasan's defense. "O Queen, do not blame him for that. There is no remedy for the lovesick. He is a madman, but from the force of his passion, not the jinn." Then, before Hasan could speak: "Hasan, this is Nur al-Huda, Queen of Wak—and a maid."

Hasan had been studying the Queen with growing perplexity. Her strange name—which he had translated into his own terms, as he had to do for all Wak nomenclature—was the least of his concerns. "I tell you, she is either my wife or very similar to her. She—"

"Don't you *know* what your wife looks like?" Shawahi cut in. "Are you *sure* you didn't see her this morning among the—"

"She looks like that," Hasan said doggedly, indicating the Queen. "But now I think this woman is *not* my—"

Nur al-Huda made a peremptory gesture. "Do you say, stranger, that I resemble your wife very closely?"

"Marvelously closely. I—"

"Exactly what is it in your wife that resembles me?"

"O my lady, you are a model of beauty and loveliness, elegance and amorous grace. Your shape is a marvel of feminine symmetry and your speech is as sweet as the songs of singing birds and your cheeks blush most becomingly and your breasts jut forward in a manner to shame all others and inflame the passions of men.

In all these things you resemble her so closely that my eyes are unable to tell you apart or say which one is more comely, and your face is fair and brilliant as hers. No one in all the kingdoms of the world and of the jinn can match my wife in beauty unless it is yourself."

Nur al-Huda's mien softened somewhat, for Hasan had obviously spoken from the heart. "As lovely as that?"

"O my lady, it is impossible for me to describe your perfection, for such is beyond the tongue of a mortal."

"Not so very beyond, I think," she murmured. "And this is the beauty of your wife?"

"Yes, my lady, except—"

"Except that she has borne two children," Shawahi interposed urgently.

The Queen laughed. "Ah—then I am as fair as he *remembers* her." Hasan suddenly realized what would have happened if he had carelessly made any exception unfavorable to the Queen. Shawahi had saved him, with disaff alertness, from a fatal mistake—for Nur al-Huda did look older than Sana.

Sana's appearance, unlike that of lesser women, had in no way suffered from her motherhood. The two women were astonishingly close, but Sana retained the luster of youth. The Queen had evidently been a maid for a long time.

"Beldame," the Queen said, "take this eloquently-spoken young man back to your house and see that all his needs are attended to. I shall examine him further at another hour." She flashed an enigmatic glance at him. "It behooves us to ease the sorrow and travail of his long separation in whatever manner we may, and explore this curious affair most carefully so that we may help him win his wish."

Shawahi took Hasan's arm to lead him away, but the Queen stopped her another moment. "Deliver him into the care of your servants, mother. Return immediately to me."

"Be very careful, Hasan," the old woman murmured as they left. "The Queen is most dangerous when she smiles." But the presence of the guards prevented her from clarifying her meaning.

For ten days Hasan lived in comfort at Shawahi's house, well attended and without cares, except for uncertainty about his future and that of his mission. Shawahi was absent; the Queen had sent her on a special trip without informing him of its purpose.

Twice the Queen summoned him for an hour's dialogue in the massive stone palace.

She was perfectly polite, but asked for no further descriptions of beauty, and Hasan suffered increasing uneasiness. She was older than his wife, by ten years or more, and it showed more in her manner than in her appearance. Where Sana was foolish, the Queen was strong; where Sana was warm, the Queen was cold. And she had a terrible temper.

Hasan answered her questions as well as he could, not certain where they were leading but sure they had a sword-like point. He recognized, belatedly, that had it been Nur al-Huda on the palace roof in the guise of a bird-maiden, instead of Sana, he never would have conquered her. She was a warrior lass, strong as a man and adept at weaponry, and she offered neither heart nor body to any man.

He wondered why she had been so readily flattered by his descriptions the first time he saw her. This weakness of vanity did not ring true, now that he knew

her better. She was vain, yes—and hot-blooded too—but in her these sentiments were given rein only when it suited her convenience. They were liabilities no more than they would have been in a man.

Meanwhile, she had promised to help him in his quest. Hasan basked in that, and stilled his uneasiness. The Queen really wasn't nearly as bad as Shawahi's morbid predictions.

The old woman reappeared abruptly on the tenth day. Never a pleasant sight, she was a horror now. Her skin was sallow and she was quivering as though in mortal fear. All strength of character seemed to have been drained out of her.

Twenty mamelukes of the palace guard accompanied her, their expressions businesslike. Something was wrong.

"Greetings, O venerable mother," Hasan said, hoping that bright words would dispel whatever dire news she brought.

Shawahi skipped the formalities. "Come speak with the Queen, ill-omened one! Didn't I warn you not to come to Wak? Didn't I offer you the best of my maidens for your own, if only you gave up this hapless quest before disaster? But no; you would not listen to my advice. You rejected my council and chose to bring destruction upon yourself and upon me also. Well, you have your wish. Up then, and take what you have chosen, for death is near at hand. Speak with the tyrant Queen!"

Frightened Hasan accompanied her. And while they journeyed to the palace, the old woman told him what had happened.

After seeing that Hasan was comfortable and that the servants knew their duties, ten days ago, Shawahi

returned to the Queen as directed. The latter was pacing the floor restlessly, her royal skirts whirling as she turned.

"Do you remember what he called her?" she snapped.

"O my lady—" Shawahi began, trying to comprehend what the Queen was talking about.

"The wife, crone. He called her 'Sana' ... and he named two sons."

The old woman waited, still uncertain what this was leading to.

"It is in my mind that the stranger spoke the truth," the Queen continued. "Otherwise he surely would have selected a woman of the city for his wife, whether he knew her or not. If my thought is true, my youngest sister, Manar al-Sana, is his wife—for the traits of surpassing beauty and excelling grace which he described are found in none but my sisters, and especially in her. And indeed she has two boys which she says she adopted as foundlings after being stranded in the wilderness. She could be the one."

Of course! Shawahi cursed herself for her stupidity. Why hadn't this occurred to her when Hasan first described his wife, since she knew all the daughters of the King well? She could so easily have enabled him to win his wife. But now...

"O my misters, what do you contemplate?" Shawahi inquired with a quaver. She had excellent reason to distrust the motives of the Queen.

Nur al-Huda appraised the old woman's attitude at a glance. One of the disconcerting things about her was the fact that she could read Shawahi more readily than the old woman could return the favor. "Do not fear for his safety, mother. I mean only to verify that my sister is his wife and the children his, for young boys should not be isolated from their sire. I swear by all manner of oaths

that if this is the case, I will not hinder him from taking them back to his own country. I will send him home with wealth and troops befitting royalty—but I must be certain, first.”

Reassured, Shawahi listened to the Queen's instructions. She was to arm herself and travel to Manar al-Sana's residence with a troop of borsemen and bring back the two boys. She was to keep the mission secret, and not tell anyone why the lads were being taken until the connection had been verified, otherwise the test would not be valid.

Shawahi prepared herself at the Palace, gathered her escort, and made the three-day journey to the southwest coast where the six other sisters dwelt. Each had her little island off the main Isle, Sana's being the most distant. The crossing was accomplished, the official request presented.

“Why of course I owe my sister a visit,” Sana agreed. “Only let me bid farewell to my father the King, and I will return with you now.”

This was not precisely what Shawahi had intended. The trial of the boys' father-relationship had to be made without the mother present, so that no equivocation was possible. “My lady, your sister bids me also bring your two boys to her, for she has never seen them.”

Sana's pleasant bearing changed. “O my mother, I cannot take them on such a journey. My vitals tremble and my heart flutters when I think of the dangers to which they might be exposed. I fear for their health even when the zephyr breathes upon them in the night.”

Shawahi had been afraid of this. “What words are these, O my daughter? Surely you don't believe your sister means harm to these innocents? She is the Queen, and you dare not cross her in this matter or

she will be very angry with you. It is hardly unnatural for her to want to see her nephews.”

Sana bowed her head. She had never had the firmness of her sisters. “I don't know what to do. I love them so much, since they are all I have to remember their father by. How can I expose them to—” She broke off, horrified.

Shawahi caught the slip. “You did know their father, then. The boys are not foundlings.”

Sana knelt and clutched the old woman's skirt. “O my mother, please, please never tell anyone that! It would mean my life.”

There was more Shawahi wanted to know, but she had promised the Queen not to divulge her true purpose, and further questions would give it away. She was sure now in her own mind that Sana was Hasan's wife, and that she still loved him. But why hadn't the silly girl rejoined him in Baghdad? Or at least left word at Serendip?

“I will say nothing, my daughter,” Shawahi promised, knowing that this would change nothing. How she longed to speak Hasan's name and bring the couple together again! But the given word was absolute, in Wak, and the reuniting would happen soon in any event. Once the Queen was assured of the situation, all would be well.

It gave her a warm feeling, for Shawahi had come to love Hasan as a son, and Sana, despite her softness, had been her favorite foster-daughter. The two were alike in physical beauty and warmth of personality and especially in that certain quality of naivete that was so rare in the world today.

Meanwhile there was the mission. “O my daughter, you know my affection for you and those dear to you, for indeed I

raised you myself after your gracious mother died. Give your sons to my charge, so that I may take them to the Queen, and I will care for them with the same heart I cared for you. Never fear for their safety; I will dress them in two little coats of mail and protect them with my life until you join them again. You can follow me at your leisure, and all will be well."

Sana remained uncertain, but finally agreed. "Take them," she said with tears in her eyes, "and I will follow when I assemble my party in a day or so, even as you say. I know they are safe in your care."

Shawahi hoped this faith was justified. The Queen had promised, but the Queen was a law of her own.

She went next to see the King, for it would have been an act of disrespect to leave without paying homage to the nominal ruler of all the empire. She had served him loyally all her adult life and held him in the highest esteem. He was a man who deserved more than a family of seven daughters and no son.

After the formalities, the King dismissed his retainers and associates and gave Shawahi private audience. "O faithful one," he said, "it gladdens my heart to see you again, for my mind is oppressed by a mysterious dream which I know not how to interpret."

Shawahi's days of dream interpretation were long behind her, but she was happy to help her King. "H ow so, O my liege and master of empires?" She had not realized how old and tired the King had become in the past few years. The spark of majesty remained, but the noble strength that had driven an empire to greatness was gone with the color of his hair. Strong-willed Nur al-Huda would probably continue to rule, in the absence of male power. Unfortunately, she had

neither the wisdom nor control of her sire; the empire was likely to suffer.

"In my dream I entered a hidden hoard, wherein was great store of monies, of jewels, of jacinths and of other riches. But it was as if naught could please me of all this treasure save seven bezels, which were the finest jewels there. I chose out one of the seven, and it was the smallest and most lustrous of them all, and its color pleased me. So I took it in my hand and fared forth from that treasury. When I came outside the door I opened my hand, rejoicing and turning over the jewel. Behold—there swooped down on me out of the welkin a strange bird from a far land, a creature not of our country, and snatched it from my hand and carried it away. Whereupon sorrow and concern and sore vexation overcame me, and I felt such exceeding chagrin that I awoke, mourning and lamenting the loss of the jewel."

Shawahi stood silent, not daring to comment. She knew what the King did not; that a traveler *had* entered Wak from a distant land and was about to claim the youngest and prettiest and most beloved of the King's seven jewels. She knew—but was bound to silence by her promise to the Queen.

"What interpretation do you place upon this vision?" the King inquired. "Indeed, it sore oppresses me and hinders my rest."

Now the burden was upon Shawahi. She could not speak falsely to her King—but neither could she break her oath.

He looked at her sharply. "Surely you have something to say, O loyal mistress of my armies? Well I remember when in all the realm there was not your peer at magic and divination...."

"That was many years ago, my master.

Now I am old and confused, and my loyalties pull me first one way and then the other until I don't know what to do. All I can say about your dream is that perhaps the bird took away the jewel from you because there was another who needed it more, having no treasure while you had seven. Perhaps that other will care for it and cherish it long after you—"

She had slipped as badly as had Sana, but the King only smiled. "You are right, old companion-at-arms. I shall have no need of jewels hereafter. I will not be born a king again...."

Shawahi's mind was in turmoil long after that interview. The King knew he was dying. She suspected she would not see the great old monarch again, and did not want to outlive him.

She took the two boys, a fine three year old lad who seemed to resemble Hasan and his brother a year younger who favored Sana, and made the return trip swiftly between the mountains and the shore, using the special trails and pathways no one else knew. She brought the boys immediately to Queen Nur al-Huda, their aunt.

The Queen rejoiced at the sight of them. She embraced them both and pressed them to her breast. They accepted this without complaint, for she was very like their mother when she chose to be. Then she seated one upon her right thigh and the other upon her left and paid them much attention, while Shawahi marveled at this unaccustomed display of affection and thought how fine a woman the Queen might be if only she had a husband to mitigate her passions.

"Fetch me Hasan forthwith," Nur al-Huda said. So she knew him by name now! Things had certainly changed ... possibly too much, she thought with a sudden qualm. "I have granted him my

safeguard and spared him from execution. He has sought asylum in my domain and taken up abode in my city, after passing through all manner of mortal risks and enduring hardships, each more terrible than the other...." She glanced meaningfully at Shawahi. "Yet he is not safe from the severance of his breath."

So the Queen still meant to kill Hasan if he were not the father of the two children. "When I bring him, will you reunite him with his sons? Or, if they are not his, will you pardon him and let him go in peace?"

The royal temper flared, frightening the children. "Fie upon you, O ill-omened old creature! How long will you try to distort my judgment in the matter of this stranger who has dared intrude himself upon us and pry into our affairs? Do you think he can come into our country uninvited and poke into our business and betray our honor, and then return safely to his own country to expose our concerns to his people and bruit them about among all the kings of the earth and send forth the report with vile merchants and others of ill repute journeying in all directions, saying 'A mortal man has entered the Isles of Wak and traversed the Land of the Jinn and the Isles of the Birds and the Place of the Wild Beasts and the Country of Warlocks and Enchanters—and returned in safety?' This shall never be, no never; and I swear by Him who built the Heavens and spread and smoothed the earth and who created and counted all creatures, that if these innocent boys are *not* his sons, I will assuredly slay him and strike off his head with my own hand! Now get out of here and *fetch me Hasan!*"

And as the old woman stumbled and fell and dragged herself away and the two boys cried in terror and the very curtains

of the palace seemed to smoke with the force of her explosion, the Queen turned and added quietly to her mamelukes: "Go with this crone and fetch the fair youth who is in her house."

Hasan was too distraught this time to pay any attention to the sturdy architecture of the palace as he entered it. In moments he would either achieve his dream, or suffer death. How he hoped the children were his!

The Queen was making merry with the two lads, who had apparently adjusted already to her mercurial moods. As Hasan approached she turned the boys to face him.

"Nasir! Mansur!" he exclaimed, recognizing them.

The older boy's eyes widened. Time had passed, and much had changed ... but in a moment he scrambled down from the Queen's lap and ran to his father. Seeing this, the younger one followed. Hasan embraced both of them.

"Merciful Buddha!" Shawahi whispered, tears of sympathy and relief streaming down her ancient face. The servants and guards of the palace stood around with sentimental expressions.

But Nur al-Huda, strangely, was not pleased. "These, then, are indeed your children, and their mother is your wife?"

"Yes, O my lady!" Hasan agreed happily, unaware of the undercurrent.

"And you are a merchant of Arabia without royal blood?"

Hasan began to get the drift. "I am, O Queen."

The Queen's eyes dilated and light froth appeared at the corners of her mouth. "You unspeakable pig!" she screamed in his face, while he stood amazed that such beauty could become so vile so rapidly. "Lecherous despoiler of

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royalty! Did you dare to lay your unclean hands upon a princess of Wak?" She struck him in the face, a hard blow with clenched fist in the manner of a man, and kicked him in the chest when he tried to escape by douchling over. It occurred to him that him motion *had* averted the blow intended ... "Fly for your life! If I had not sworn to do you no evil were your story true, I would slay you this moment!"

Shawahi tried to say something, hut the Queen turned on ber. "Quiet, O ill begotten harlot! But for the fact I am loath to hreak my oath, I would put you and him both to death in the foulest fashion." The old woman retreated and fell on the floor.

The Queen returned her attention to Hasan. "Depart, monster, and return to your own country before I lose my temper! I swear by my fortune and all the power of Wak which is mine that if I ever see you again I will smite off your head and kill anyone with you."

Then she cried to her guards. "Throw this carrion out!"

Once again the men took hold of Hasan and dragged him on his face across the floor and thrust him out of the palace. He stumbled away, hruised and faint, his mind filled with the picture of the Queen's terrible wrath and Shawahi's horror as she realized they had been betrayed.

Chapter Ten

Now Hasan understood why the old woman had mistrusted the Queen. Once again he had learned not to be naive—too late. He should have taken one of the lovely maidens of the city as a second wife, until able to search out Sana. As it was, be was virtually condemned to

death, for no citizen would risk the wrath of the Queen by helping him, and he could never make his way through the lands of the Jinn and Birds and Beasts and all the rest of it alone.

What had he brought upon his wife and children? Surely the Queen would have no mercy upon them, after this.

Hasan cursed himself and wished be had never attempted this quest. He had succeeded only in hringing destruction upon everyone he loved, and he *still* had no idea where his wife was, or any power to help her. Yet he had been warned....

His new Wak clothing was fouled with the dirt of the road, his face and chest smarted with the blows of the Queen and her guards, and the pehhles of the road were hard on his tender feet. He had worn sandals so long that he had no callouses on his soles.

Black-haired children ceased their play and stared at him as he passed. They knew already that he was a stranger again and an outcast.

The houses of the city diminished into primitive huts at the outskirts. Spindly rails supported leaning roofs, the thick thatch descending over the edges of the road to head-height. Bamboo and bundles of sticks lined the street, providing convenient biding-places for the children.

Where would his own children hide?

The city ended at the river. Hasan turned and walked heside the water, passing the crowded rickety piers reaching out from bouses on stilts. Dugout boats were so common that the water heneath them was hardly visible in places. More children sat in many of them, staring passively out at him.

He passed an area of level sand where thousands of gutted fish were drying in the sun. He was hungry—hut the fish-

man gave such a glower when he approached that Hasan moved quickly on.

Outside the city the mountains rose inland and the short plain spread out ahead. Not far beyond this was the sea. Palms and other vegetation filled all uncultivated land.

Hasan climbed a steep hillside, remembering the hills of Serendip. Here he could overlook the city, seeing its square peaked temples and clustered residences. Tiny clouds floated above the sea, looking solid in spite of the lesson the ifrit Dahnash had taught him. A highway passed through the city, extending beyond sight in either direction, the parallel lines of its wagon-tracks threading the comparatively narrow area between the mountain range and the sea.

His attention was attracted to a caravan approaching the city from the northwest. For a moment he was tempted to descend and join it, since the merchants would not yet have heard the Queen's edict, and he knew merchant-talk; but he realized that it was traveling toward the city and would only carry him back into trouble.

Now that he had been cast out of his tranquil life of the past ten days, he envied the traveling merchants fiercely. They would enter the city and retire perhaps to all-night feasting, sitting before bowls of whipped egg and dipping tasty morsels from a common pot of boiling oil. A mushroom, a vegetable, a hit of chicken-immersed in the cooling egg froth and eaten immediately, while servants kept the pot perpetually full. The savory food alternating with warm rice wine...Shawahi had finally convinced him that Allah could not have meant this when He forbade intoxicants, for who could find harm in such delicious drink?

Evening was coming and Hasan was savagely hungry. There was no one to help him, and he was foolish to dream of a banquet at such a time. He looked about, observing the richness of the land. He had foraged before, and he could do it again.

In the morning the owner politely suggested that he seek another location, and Hasan had to climb down from the elevated platform where he had spent a difficult night. He had not known what the tall structure was for; he had mounted it because the height seemed better than the richly crawling ground. Now he watched the farmer climb the hefty bamboo supports to the flat square twelve feet high and look about him at the field. Long, fine cords of fiber stretched from the platform to various parts of the field. The entire arrangement was nonsensical to Hasan—until he saw a flock of birds descend upon the growing grain and begin to feed.

The guardian grasped a cord and yanked. At the far end, near the birds, a bright grotesquely-painted banner leapt up. The birds took off in fright. The farmer let go the string and the scarecrow fell to the ground again.

Hasan smiled. Now he could see that each cord was attached to a device in a different part of the field. The birds would not raid this grain.

Farther along he came across a naked urchin squatting on a stone in a stream. The lad held a long stick with a loop at the end. A game? Hasan doubted it, for the boy was unsmiling and quite motionless. Interested, he watched, ready to learn something more while suppressing thoughts of his own predicament. The ways of these people were strange, but seemed to make good sense once understood.

The boy moved—and there, snared in the loop, was a fine fish.

Hasan came to a large leaning tree overhanging the water of a river-pool. As he rested beneath it he discovered a scroll hanging from a branch. Curious, he took it down and unrolled it. It was covered with the peculiar script of Wak that he could not read. What was it doing in such a place? If it were a message, for whom was it intended?

Probably it had nothing to do with him. Perhaps young lovers used this tree as a trysting-place, and wrote each other notes. Still, he could not avoid the feeling that it somehow concerned him, and that the matter it discussed was of extreme importance. If only he could decipher it!

He left it where it was, drawing renewed confidence from the experience in spite of his frustration. This had to be a sign, a signal of change—and his situation could hardly grow worse.

Up the river a distance two other hoys were engaged in heated debate. This was unusual, in this land, for the people were generally quite polite. They seldom spoke negatively or made a direct refusal. Buddha, it seemed, had been a passive man (not a god, as he had assumed at first), given to harmony and peace, and his followers reflected this. Only the Queen differed, though she seemed to make up for all the manners of her subjects.

Before the lads lay two objects: a rod of shining copper engraved with many talismans, and a skull-cap of fine leather, sewn from three strips and decorated with bright silver ornaments.

"It belongs to me!" exclaimed one hoy. "It's mine!" returned the other. Their argument became a fight; they beat at each other with their fists until one had a swollen eye and the other dripped blood

from his nose.

Hasan stepped between them. "This is none of my business," he said, though the truth was that he was glad to worry about something so elementary as a boyish difference of opinion. "But it's a shame to see two such fine young men as yourselves get into such trouble. Is there some way I can help?"

The hoys were quite satisfied to break it off, each having found his adversary equal to himself. "O Uncle," said one, "why don't you settle our dispute, since you have no personal interest."

Bright boy. "I'll be happy to, if I can. Tell me about it." Evidently these boys were not of the city, though they were well-dressed, and either hadn't heard about him or didn't care. It was nice to be involved with people again, even in so trivial a connection.

"We are twin brothers," said the second hoy. "Our father was a mighty magician who lived in a cave in that mountain yonder." He pointed, as though this were an important detail, but Hasan still wasn't sure which mountain he meant. One thing, however, was now clear: sorcerer's sons would not have been trained to settle things politely.

"He died and left us this cap and this rod," put in the first boy. "And my brother tried to claim the rod, when really it was meant for me. So you tell him to take his cap and—"

"You liar!" shouted the other. "It's my rod!"

Hasan got them apart before any more sibling damage occurred. "Just what is the difference between these objects?" he inquired. "They look equally valuable to me, though perhaps the rod, being solid copper, is worth more. Why don't you sell them both and split the money?"

Both hoys were horrified. "Sell them!

You don't know their properties," the first said. Or the second; Hasan had trouble telling them apart. He smiled benignly. "By all means tell me their properties."

"They are extraordinary," one boy said. "Our father worked on these things for a hundred and thirty-five years, until he made them perfect and equipped them with secret powers and dissolved all spells that might interfere with their action. Once he did that, he died."

How neat. "But what are their properties?"

"Each of them has a wonderful secret virtue. The rod is worth all the riches of all the Isles of Wak, and so is the cap."

"What are these virtues?"

The boys exchanged glances uncertainly.

"Now I can hardly settle your argument unless I know the facts," Hasan said, amused. "Either you tell me, or I'll go away and let you fight some more. Maybe you *both* can acquire bloody noses."

The boy with the nose touched it tenderly and capitulated. "We weren't supposed to tell," he said. "But the cap will make anyone who wears it invisible, and no one can see him until he takes it off."

"And the rod gives the holder authority over seven tribes of the jinn, who all are bound by its magic. When he smites it against the ground, their kings come to do him homage, and all their subjects are at his service."

Hasan subdued his laughter. "Those are very fine properties, boys. Now suppose I make a contest for you to see who deserves what. The one who wins shall have the rod, and the other will have to be satisfied with the cap. Fair enough?"

"Yes!" they exclaimed together,

delighted at the simplicity of his solution.

"Good." Hasan had to remind himself that this was a perfectly serious matter to the boys. The one who won the rod would really believe he had seven tribes of jinn at his call, while the other would be certain he was invisible. He'd probably have to humor them both. At least he could make the contest real.

He picked up a stone. "I'm going to throw this stone as far as I can. Whoever reaches it and picks it up first shall have the rod, and the loser takes the cap."

"Yes, Uncle!" they said, vying with each other for a favorable position, "We're ready."

Hasan whirled around splendidly like a heathen discus-thrower and flung the stone. It sailed high through the air and disappeared behind a hill. The boys were off immediately, racing and shouldering each other aside in their separate but equal determinations to win.

Now he could laugh. He let forth a bellow. O for the confidence and faith of youth!

The boys topped the hill and dropped out of sight. Idly Hasan picked up the rod, resisting the temptation to tap it against the ground. He put the cap on his head. Such magic, if only it were real, would be the answer to all his problems!

He admired the fit of the cap, which seemed to have been made for him, and the balance of the rod. He felt like a king with crown and scepter. He would dispense the prizes with appropriate dignity!

The lad with the sore nose came over the hill carrying the stone, while his brother walked disconsolately behind. Hasan struck his royal pose and waited.

The boys looked around. "Where is our arbiter?" demanded the winner.

"How should I know? Maybe he flew up

to heaven to join the Enlightened One, or sank down into the earth like an ifrit."

"Very funny. He's got my rod."

"Well, you can't change now. The cap is mine."

"Then where is your cap?"

They looked at Hasan, then at each other, in seeming alarm. "Do you think he could have—?"

"He isn't here. We'd better find him before he gets away with our stuff! You take this side of the hill, and I'll check the far side."

Hasan held his pose, playing their game. Of course they had seen him wearing the cap, and had to feign invisibility for him or ruin the contest. He could wait. They'd 'accidentally' discover him soon enough.

But their search did not abate in intensity as time passed. Several times they looked directly at him, but with eyes unfocused and not even a knowing smile. This was a very serious game.

"He's taken them!" the winner said angrily. "Why did you have to hah about those properties?"

Me! You were the one who—"

They were fighting again, this time with the redoubled bitterness of futility. Hasan automatically rushed up and extended his arm....

...and couldn't see it. He flexed his fingers and stared.

He *was* invisible.

Shawahi exclaimed in surprise as her utensils bounced on the floor. "That wicked whore of a Queen has sent a demon to torment me!" she muttered, replacing a bamboo cup on the shelf. "If only I could remember my spells—"

The cup jostled off again. Shawahi stared, then backed off. "She *did*. A demon!" She shook her head, more in

frustration than fear. "What mercy can I expect, seeing how abominably she deals with her own sister!"

Hasan took off the cap and appeared before her. "Her sister?"

"Hasan! What has happened to your reason? If the Queen—"

"The Queen will never see me."

"But she has been tormenting your wife! What will she do if she lays hands upon you again?"

"My wife!"

But Shawahi insisted on learning about his acquisition of the cap of invisibility before going further into the activities of the palace. Hasan sketched the events of the past day rapidly. "It seemed to be Allah's will that I possess these things," he said, a trifle guiltily, for he did not feel easy about the manner he had taken them. "I certainly had better use for them than those foolish boys."

"This is the way it was destined," she said. He had been afraid that she would insist that he return the magic implements at once, yet for some reason she chose to overlook the impropriety. This did not ease his conscience.

"...and the princess Manar al-Sana arrived yesterday afternoon with her train, sooner than I expected, and went to the palace to—"

"Sana! *Yesterday?*"

"Yes. The same day the Queen banished you. She must have been very anxious for her children, to—Hasan! What is the matter?"

He had been so close. He had assumed it was a merchant caravan. If he had gone to meet it....

But even as Allah had willed that he possess the cap and rod, He had made him pay for them by extending the quest. He had not encountered his wife, and she had gone on into the city to visit the

Queen.

The two boys ran to Sana as soon as they saw her. "Our father! O our father!" Nasir cried.

She strained them to her bosom. "What! Have you seen your sire?" Her eyes closed, for she knew that their father was far away, and she could not even admit, while her sister listened, that she knew his identity.

But Shawahi was close enough to see the tears Sana tried to conceal, and overhear the murmured lament. "I wish I had never left him! If I knew any way to find him, I would take you to him now."

"But he was here!" Nasir insisted.

"Here!" Mansur echoed.

Sana embraced her boys again, half believing them. "I am the one who did this to myself and my children, and ruined my own house and the life of a fine man. I never knew how much I loved him, until I—"

Nur al-Huda had seen enough. "O whore, how did you come by these children? Did you marry secretly, or have you committed vile fornication?"

"O my sister, I never—"

"Sister, if you played the piece to a stranger, you deserve exemplary punishment. But if you married without our knowledge or permission, why did you abandon your husband and take away his children and bring them here? Why did you try to conceal their origin from us? Do you imagine we are so easily fooled?"

"Before Allah, O my sister, I—"

"Before Allah? What heathen mockery is this? Surely we are fortunate to have learned your case and revealed your condition and bared your nakedness! Guards!"

And while Shawahi stood by, helpless against the wrath of her Queen, the guards siezed Sana roughly and pinned

back her elbows and shackled her with iron. They knotted her lovely long hair over a pole and suspended her by it. The Queen strode up and tore off her sister's dress and beat her back so harshly with the cane that Sana screamed in agony. Her skin rose up in great long welts.

After that the Queen cursed her and cast her into a prison cell and sat down to write a letter to the King. Shawahi had to bring a sheet of the valuable writing paper made from the bark of certain trees, and a vial of the brilliant ink. This service enabled her to look over the Queen's shoulder and read the characters as they were printed.

Nur al-Huda had been an excellent student in her youth, under Shawahi's tutelage, and her form was perfect. She began carefully at the bottom left corner of the sheet and placed symbol upon symbol in a vertical column until she reached the top, after which she began another column at the bottom.

The contents of the missive were quite fair: "There hath appeared in our land a man, mortal, by name Hasan, and our sister Manar al-Sana avoucheth that she is lawfully married to him according to the conventions of his country and that she bare him two sons whose origin she tried to conceal from us and from thee; nor did she discover this to us till there came to us this man who informed us that he wedded her in a far domain and tarried with her three years, after which she took her children and departed without his knowledge, only leaving word with his mother that he should look for her in the Isles of Wak. So we summoned the children, and when our servant Shawahi brought the boys before me I displayed them to this Hasan and was certified that they were indeed his sons and she his wife and that the story was true in every

particular and that he was blameless for his quest, and the reproach and infamy of this matter rested with my sister. Now I feared the rending of the veil of honor before the folk of our isles, that it he revealed that a princess of Wak had cohabited with a heathen commoner and borne his children; so when this wanton, this traitress came to me I was incensed against her and hanged her up by the hair and hastinado'd her grievously and cast her into prison. Behold, I have acquainted thee with her case and it is thine to command, and whatso thou orderest that will we do. Thou knowest that in this affair is dishonor and disgrace to our name, and haply the islanders will hear of it, and our shame shall become amongst them a hyword; wherefore it befitteth thee to return us an answer with all speed."

And she summoned an ifrit and instructed it to carry the message to the King and bring his reply with all haste.

Next morning the ifrit returned. "I thought the old boy was going to die of rage and shame," it said, pleased. "He wouldn't even keep your letter, but forced it back upon me. He's still got fire!"

"Begone!" Nur al-Huda snapped, snatching the reply from the demon's hand. She had never been one to accept impertinence from the supernatural.

"But what shall I do with your original message? I don't want it."

"Hang it on a tree, for all I care!"

"Yes, mistress," it said, and vanished.

The King's reply was brief. "I commit her case to thee and give thee command over her life," it said. "If the matter be as thou sayest, dispose of her case without consulting me."

The Queen gave a grunt of satisfaction and sent for Manar al-Sana. They set the

prisoner before her clad in haircloth, shackled and pinioned with her own hair. Sana stood aghast and aghased, no longer flinching from the pain every movement brought from her welts. Shawahi knew she was calling to mind her former high estate and bemoaning her present humiliation and pain.

"Bring the ladder," the Queen directed her guards. Under her supervision they set it up, laid Sana upon it, and tied her supine with arms spread out and tied behind. They wound her hair about the rungs so that her head was immobile and uncomfortably tilted back. The two little boys stared uncomprehendingly.

Sana cried out and wept, but the Queen had no pity, and no one in the palace dared offer the prisoner so much as a kind word. Such harsh treatment was in direct violation of the principles of their religion—but they had to obey the Queen.

"O my sister," Sana sobbed, "how can your heart be hardened against me? Have you no mercy on me nor concern for these little children?"

The Queen only grew angry. "O wanton! O harlot! How shall I have compassion on you, O traitress?"

Sana tried to shake her head, but could not. "I appeal for judgment to the Lord of the Heavens! I am innocent of the things you revile me for. I have done no whoredom. I am lawfully married to Hasan of Bassorah. Indeed, I should be angry with you because of your hardheartedness against me! How can you accuse me of harlotry without proof?"

The Queen did not reply immediately, and for that moment Shawahi hoped her heart had softened. But she was only considering her next action. "How dare you speak to me thus?"

Nur al-Huda now approached and struck Sana across the face and breast

with her hands, battering again and again with such ferocity that the victim screamed and fainted.

"Water!" the Queen ordered, and servants dashed jars of it across Sana's upturned face until she revived, choking. Her rough clothing was tight and disarrayed, and her fingers twisted helplessly under the chafing bonds. The water soaked down her hair and glistened on her face and dripped from the sodden mass of her upper garment. Her expression was hopeless; she was not lovably now.

But still she tried, lapsing into the mannerism she had picked up in Baghdad.

*If I have sinned in
any way,
Or done ill deed and
gone astray,
I beg—*

"Dare you speak before your Queen in verse, O whore, and seek to excuse yourself for the mortal sins you are guilty of? I wish I could return your gigalo to you and see how much of your wickedness and lewdness you repented then! Will you disavow the commoner?"

Sana lay still, not answering.

"The cane!" It was presented, and Nur al-Huda bared her arms, took it up, and beat her sister along the length of her body.

"Admit your guilt!" the Queen demanded, panting.

Sana's mouth was bruised and swollen where the hard cane had struck. Droplets of pink were spattered where the blows had cut lips against teeth and thrown the bloody spittle out. "How can I curse the man I love?" she cried.

"The whip!" It was a length of plaited thongs sturdy enough to sting an elephant into full flight. The Queen brought it

down across Sana's body with such force that her clothing was shredded in the narrow band it struck. More blows followed, and huge stripes showed across her hips and stomach. She was unconscious again.

Shawahi could take no more. She fled from the scene, weeping and cursing the Queen.

Nur al-Huda had not forgotten this suspect witness. "Fetch her to me!" she cried to the guards.

They caught Shawahi and dragged her back, then threw her on the floor and held her there. The Queen raised her whip and beat the old woman ruthlessly until she knew no more.

"Drag this ill-omened hag out on her face and dump her in the street with the rest of the garbage."

"And indeed," Shawahi finished, "the Queen repents of letting you go. She has sent men after you, promising a hundred pounds of gold and my former rank in her service to the man who brings you back. She has sworn that when she has you again she will execute you and your wife and your children together."

Hasan realized that all this had happened while he played a foolish game with sorcerer's sons. He had laughed while his wife was being tortured!

"O my mother! I have brought dishonor and destruction upon my family and upon you. What can I do to deliver my wife and children from this tyrannical Queen and to restore your position to you?"

"This was not your fault, Hasan. Save yourself before the Queen's minions capture you."

"I must undo the damage I have done. I must save my wife from torment."

"How can you rescue her from the

Queen? Nur al-Huda has all the power of Wak at her command. Go and hide yourself, O my son, and may your god grant you safe-conduct from this cursed land."

"No!" But Hasan was in despair. There didn't seem to be any avenues open to him. Sana would die, unless—

"Shawahi! The magic implements!"

She looked at him with dawning hope. "The cap and rod! I had forgotten. Glory be to Him who quickens the bones, though they be old and rotten as mine!"

"Do you know anything about these things?" Hasan still hadn't tried the rod, partly because he was afraid it would work. How could he control seven kings of the jinn?

Shawahi was overjoyed now. "I know the rod and I know its maker, who was my instructor in the science of sorcery. He was a mighty magician and spent a hundred and thirty-five years working on this rod and this cap before he died. And I heard him say to his two boys, 'O my sons, these two things are not of your lot, though I fashioned them for you, for there will come a stranger from a far country who will take them from you by force, and you shall not be able to prevent it.' They replied, 'O our father, tell us in what manner he will avail to take them,' but he said 'I wot not, except that this stranger will be given the signal of success by a message left in a tree in his path by an ifrit.' And O my son, now I realize that you are the one he spoke of, and the implements are yours by divine will. By means of these you shall surely save your wife and children, for even the magic of the Queen can not prevail against these things."

So the rod and cap *were* his, to do with as he liked. How intricate were the mechanisms of fate! "But how can I make

my wife and children invisible, when there is only one cap? I would not trust my family to the jinn." He had not forgotten Dahnash.

Shawahi smiled. "Pay attention and I'll tell you how. I refuse to deal with the wicked Queen, after the foul fashion she has used us all. I have a mind to go to the caves of the magicians and stay there until I die. But you, O my son, have much to gain yet from this world. Don your cap and take your rod in hand and enter the place where your wife and children are. Untie Sana and smite the earth with the rod, saying 'Be ye present, O servants of these names engraved!' whereupon the jinn will appear. One should present himself as one of the chiefs of the tribes, and you can command him whatever you wish."

Hasan was swayed by her certainty, but not enough. "How can I trust these jinn?"

"As long as you hold the rod, you have absolute command. There is no counter-spell or evasion they can make to do you harm. It took the magician a hundred and thirty-five years to counteract everything, but he did it. Just tell the jinn to bore a hole in the wall to let you out, and to hold back the Queen's guards, if you're worried about too close a contact with the servants of the rod." She rubbed her eyes, and Hasan could see that she had bruises. "Now let me rest my brittle bones in sleep; the beating the Queen gave me disheartens me somewhat."

"Yes, my mother," Hasan said contritely. He picked up the rod, set the cap on his head, and disappeared.

Five steps from the house he paused. Did the cap really work? Of course it did—yet new doubt assailed him. He needed one more confirmation.

He tiptoed back into the house.

Shawahi had left the main room, probably seeking out a couch. He moved about, looking for her.

The rod clattered loudly against a wall. Irritated, he set it down. He couldn't have it giving him away, and it was hard to keep it clear of obstructions when he couldn't see it. He noted that it resumed visibility the moment his hand left it.

He spied Shawahi lying on a mat, her eyes closed. He crept beside her, opened his mouth—and saw how tired and broken she was. She had not deceived him about the beating; black marks were on her arms and neck, and there was dirt in her hair where it had been rubbed against the ground.

Hasan backed off and left her sleeping. Of course the cap worked!

Chapter Eleven

The cap worked. He passed the guard at the outer gate of the palace in the late afternoon sunlight, and the man stared directly through him. Hasan accidentally scuffed a pebble, and the guard glanced at it suspiciously and rubbed his eyes.

The great entrance-hall was empty. He almost collided with a servant in a passage as he found his way to the throne room. He had to be more careful; invisibility did not mean he was secure from detection. If the Queen suspected, she could surround him with her guards so that he could not get away, then work some devastating counter-spell.

After several false alarms he located the proper room. He had to jam his hands against his mouth to stop the cry that threatened to burst out.

Sana was there, bound to the ladder by her hair, her clothing tattered and her face swollen and bloody. She gave evidence of life only by the tears streaking

her cheeks and by her pained sighs. The two children sat silently under the ladder.

Only a suggestion of the breathtaking beauty of the bird-maiden remained. Every part of Sana's body was bruised and red, and blood matted her shredded clothing in several places. Her eyes were swollen almost shut, and she was no more elegant at this moment than Shawahi.

Hasan loved her more now than he ever had in Baghdad.

The world became dark before his face and the burning tears of remorse stung his eyes. He was responsible for this! If only he had been more discreet....

When he recovered himself he saw that Sana had fainted from pain. The children were playing on the floor, not understanding the terrible significance of the things that had happened.

No one was near. Hasan removed his cap.

Nasir spied him and cried out, "O our father!"

Hasan immediately became invisible again, afraid that the shout had been heard. Sana's eyes opened ... but nobody was in sight except the children.

"O our father!" Nasir repeated.

Sana's face crumpled. "O Hasan, Hasan," she cried, "my heart breaks and my vitals are rent asunder for grief that ever I wronged you!" Then, to the boys: "What brings your father to mind at such a time?"

They could not answer, except to point where there was nothing. Sana wept. "I wish I could see what you see! How I curse myself now for my foolishness and coldness to my husband. How happy I was in Baghdad with Hasan and his dear mother. If only I had never learned that he had saved my feather-suit!"

Hasan had been about to reveal himself, but now he paused.

Sana's tears ran down and wetted the floor. She had no hand free to wipe them away, and the flies buzzed and settled on her wherever they chose. "I thought I could not be happy unless I returned to Wak," she said. "And once I had my suit, the wind took my fancy and I forgot my husband and flew across the sea. Then my father the King burned my suit so that I could not stray again, and I could not return to my love, though I sorely wanted to. Would I had died on that day!"

Hasan could no longer contain himself. He took the cap from his head and stood before her.

Sana saw him and let out a scream that resounded throughout the palace. "Hasan! How did you come here?" Her eyes overflowed again, and Hasan wept too, in sympathy.

"O my dear husband!" she said after a moment. "Fate has had its course and the pen has written what was ordained when Time began; so Allah upon you, go and hide wherever you came from, lest my sister discover you and murder us all!"

"O my lady and princess," Hasan returned, "I have undertaken many adventures to come here, and either I will deliver you from this torment and carry you and my children back to my country despite the nose of your wicked sister, or I shall die." He reached for her bonds.

Sana smiled, and a little of her splendor returned, but she shook her head in negation. "O my love, it is far from the power of any except Allah Almighty to deliver me from this. Do not touch me. Save yourself and go your way and do not cast yourself into destruction, for my sister had conquering hosts none may withstand. Even if you brought me out of here and set foot beyond the city, how could we escape from the Isles and the

perils of the neighboring lands? You must have seen the wonders and dangers of the road when you came here. Not even the jinn are safe. So do not add to my care by sacrificing yourself in a futile cause; save your life and leave me to my fate."

"By your life, O light of my eyes, I will not leave this place without you!" He made again to free her, but found the cords tight.

"O foolish man! You don't know what you're saying. No one can escape from these realms against the will of the Queen, though he has control over all the tribes of the jinn!"

"O lady of fair ones! I *have* control over—"

He stopped. He had forgotten to bring the rod!

"Hasan!" But her gaze was beyond him. Someone was coming!

He jammed the cap on his head and was hidden from sight as the Queen stalked in. "O wanton, what man were you talking to?"

Sana concealed her amazement at Hasan's disappearance. "Who is with me that I could talk to, except these children?"

Angry, Nur al-Huda raised her whip and struck. Hasan lurched forward—then realized that without the rod he was powerless. One scream from the Queen would bring death upon them all, cap or not.

Helplessly he stood and watched the Queen beat Sana senseless again.

"Take her to a smaller cell," Nur al-Huda rapped. "I don't want to listen to her stupid self-pity any more." She strode out.

The servant-girls loosed Sana's bonds and worked her hair free of the ladder. Now that the Queen was out of sight, they were quite gentle. "It's a shame to have

this happen," one said. "She shouldn't have married a commoner, but still—"

"The Queen is jealous of her beauty and favor with the King," the other said in a conspiratory tone.

"And that she should bear two fine sons by a handsome man, while the Queen is still a maid!"

They carried Sana to another chamber and set her down, binding her hands and feet but not putting her on the ladder again. One of them led Nasir and Mansur over, while Hasan followed quietly.

Sana revived and gazed about her blankly. "I thought I saw—" Then she remembered, and said no more. The servants, seeing her awake, made her as comfortable as they dared and departed.

Hasan removed the cap. Sana smiled, relieved that he had not been a figment of her delirium. "O my husband, none of this would have happened if I had not rebelled against you and left home without your permission. A woman never knows a man's worth until she loses him!"

"You weren't at fault," Hasan said, but he felt a warm glow. "I shouldn't have neglected you so carelessly. But now Allah has granted me the power to rescue you. Tell me—do you want to return to your father's home, in the hope he will have mercy upon you, or will you come with me to Baghdad again?"

"I have done evil, O my love—but if Allah reunites us, I will never again leave you or disagree with you. No, never!" But as soon as she said it, she was weeping again. "Go away, Hasan. You don't know the perils of this land. You can't help me now."

The palace girls heard her and came to the chamber, but Hasan was not in sight.

"Damn the Queen!" one exclaimed. "She shouldn't torture her own sister this

way."

"There's nothing we can do," her companion replied. "If we even give her a drink of water, our heads will roll in the morning. We'll just have to leave her here for the night."

Night! Hasan's heart leapt as the girls went out. Soon it would be dark. *Then* he could lead his family out safely.

He sat beside her and told Sana of his adventures, while the shadows intensified. When the palace was dark and quiet he untied her hands and feet and kissed her between the eyes and embraced her ... very gently.

"How long we have longed for reunion," he said, stroking her hair while she sobbed in relief. "Are we asleep or awake?" Then he set her on her feet and cautioned her to silence. He put on his cap—it seemed to make no difference, in the dark—and picked up Nasir while she carried Mansur.

The throne-room was empty. They moved through it in silence, still afraid of discovery, though the entire palace seemed to be unattended. A single guard stood in the entrance hall, leaning against a stone column, and that was all.

Hasan whispered another word of caution and squared his cap. One guard was sufficient to ruin everything, if he could not be efficiently subdued. Hasan had no weapon, but did have a length of the cord used to bind Sana. A loop of that around the guard's neck—

A lamp flickered in the alcove beside the sentry. Hasan was pleased to observe no shadow behind himself. He was still invisible. He approached the guard, raised the cord between his two hands—

The guard emitted a great snort. Hasan backed off, afraid the man had discovered him. He waited, poised. The guard snorted again, but did not move. His head

rested against the column and his hands fell slackly. Hasan studied him with suspicion.

A minute passed.

The guard was asleep! Fully armed and standing—hut snorting fitfully against the wall!

Hasan hastened back to Sana and gave instructions. Then, while he stood alertly beside the unalert guard, glad that no violence was necessary after all, she and the boys tiptoed past.

No guard stood at the front gate. The one assigned to this post had retired, apparently, and locked up for the night.

Hasan came up short. "There is no majesty and there is no might except in Allah, the Glorious, the Great!" he swore. He heat one hand against the other in frustration. "O dispeller of hopes! I thought of everything hut this! Now none of us can escape the palace!"

Sana wept with disappointment. "Now there is nothing we can do hut kill ourselves and thus escape this awful trap. Otherwise we will all be terribly tortured tomorrow."

But as they stood before the gate exclaiming in distress, a voice called from the other side.

"Hasan of Bassorah!"

Amazed, he did not dare to answer. Had the Queen discovered them already?

"I will not open to you or your wife unless you promise to obey my command!" the voice continued.

Sana clutched him, speechless with terror, and Hasan himself was tempted to run hack into the palace. Someone or *something* certainly had found them out.

"What's the matter with you?" the voice persisted querulously. "Do you lack the courtesy to answer a poor old woman?"

"Shawahi!" Hasan cried, weak with

relief. "O mistress of Calamities, we promise to do whatever you bid. Only hurry and open the door before the guard wakes and comes upon us."

A dry laugh. "Who do you think cast the spell of sleep over that guard and all the servants too?"

The gate clanked and swung open. Shawahi was there, riding astride an enormous jar of red crockery with a rope of palm-fiber about its neck. It was suspended in mid-air and quivered like a colt.

Shawahi cackled at their astonishment. "O my children, I know forty modes of magic, hy the least of which I could make this city into a dashing sea, swollen with clashing hillows, and ensorcel each damsel within to a fish and each man to a crah, and all before dawn!"

"But why didn't you do that before?" Hasan asked her.

The old woman looked ahashed. "The Queen has counterspells, and I'm long out of practice."

Hasan did not pursue the issue. He realized that few illusions were permitted the aged. Perhaps Shawahi had been a potent sorceress in the flush of her youth—hut only minor spells were available to her today.

"What is the promise you demanded for opening the gate?" he inquired, closing it carefully behind them.

"You must swear to take me with you, and not leave me to the vengeance of that whorish harlot the Queen. Whatever happens to you shall happen to me; if you escape, I shall escape, and if you perish I shall perish with you. I would never survive the torments of that ahominable woman, that trihadist, that—"

Sana embraced her. "O yes, my mother. You shall come with us. We know how wonderful you are."

"Follow me!" Shawahi shouted, giving her magical steed a slap with the rein.

The jar bucked and dropped to the ground, depositing her in a heap. She cursed and kicked at it, but her mount was lifeless.

"That spell was guaranteed for a full day's normal use!" she complained.

Hasan suppressed a smile and helped her to her feet. "It may have spoiled, in all the years you stored it," he said. "Let me get my rod and we'll have all the magic we need."

Shawahi scrambled to the jar and reached inside. "Why do you think I came after you?" She drew out the rod. "Take off that cap so I can give it to you!"

He kept forgetting that he was invisible. He rectified the matter and accepted the rod. "Let's remove ourselves a space before we experiment."

In the morning, weary but far from the city, they camped at the foot of a mighty chasm. Sheer rock rose vertically two hundred feet or more, and the walls curved in and out so that it was impossible to sight along the length of the path.

"The Queen won't find us here!" Shawahi announced with satisfaction. "Bring out your rod, Hasan."

He obliged, wishing she had phrased the request a little differently. He held it in his hands for a moment, studying the intricate workmanship and the seven complex patterns engraved along its length. Now that the time had come, he was distinctly nervous. What were the words he was supposed to say?

"Come on, lad. We have very little time."

Stung by Shawahi's rebuke, Hasan lifted the rod and struck it against the earth. "Ho, you servants of these names,

appear to me and acquaint me with your conditions!"

The earth shook and cracked open, and sulphurous hillows of smoke roiled up. Had he said the proper words?

The air cleared. Seven enormous ifrits stood before him, their feet as high as Shawahi's jar and their heads reaching high into the air. As one, they dropped to their knees and kissed the ground. "Here we are at your service, O our lord and ruler. What is your command? One word from you, and we will dry up the seas and remove mountains from their places!"

Hasan clutched the rod tightly and somehow held his ground. "Who are you and what are your races and tribes and clans?"

They kissed the earth again and spoke with one voice, so that the echoes reverberated throughout the canyon. "We are seven kings, each ruling over seven tribes of the jinn of all types, and numerous lesser orders, flyers and divers, dwellers in mountains and wastes and valleys and hauntings of the seas. So bid us do whatever you will, for we are your servants and slaves, and whoever possesses this rod has dominion over all our necks, and we owe him obedience."

Much of this passed Hasan by, though he got its import, largely because the rolling echoes confused the multiple sound of their speech and left him struggling for the meaning.

"How about showing me your tribes and hosts?"

"O our lord, if we did that, we would be afraid for your safety, for the name of our hosts is legion and they come in divers forms and fashions and figures. Some are without heads and others without bodies, while still others are in the likeness of ravening beasts. There is no room here for them all, and—"

They spoke in septuple unison, and he still could hardly understand them. He had a bright idea. "Do any of you have in your tribe a firedrake named Dahnash?"

"Be he ifrit, jinni or demon?"

"Ifrit. A flying one."

They consulted reverberantly. "O master, we have seven hundred and fifteen flying firedrakes named Dahnash."

"Seven hun—!" Hasan tried again. "The one I want did service for the Shaykh Abu al-Ruwaysh several months ago."

They consulted again. "Master, only six flying ifrits named Dahnash have done service for the Black Shaykh in the past year."

"This one has an abominable sense of humor—"

One king struck his head with his fist—a blow that would have pulverized a mortal. "You desire *that* Dahnash?"

"Well, I know him," Hasan said, wondering whether it was such a good idea after all. "If you could turn him over to me for the duration, so I wouldn't have to bother you with little things ... Well, you could go home, or whatever it is you do in your off hours, until—"

"Fair enough, Master!"

A clap of thunder deafened his ears. The seven enormous kings were gone, and in their place:

"Dahnash bin Faktash reporting as directed," the single ifrit said. Then it looked again. "O, *brother!*"

Hasan smiled. This was his ifrit, all right.

Shawahi took Sana's arm. "Come, my daughter. I know some ancient medicines that will heal your injuries in no time. Leave this business to Hasan." They departed with the children, although Nasir looked as though he would rather

have stayed to talk with the ifrit. Hasan dreaded to think what mannerisms the boy might pick up from such exposure.

He got down to business. "I am now the owner of this rod of power over the jinn," he said.

"Let me see that, mortal," Dahnash said respectfully.

Hasan handed it over, then abruptly wondered what he had done. The ifrit smiled. "Alas, the power of such command is not granted to such as me," he said. "This rod is marvelously well counterspelled. Anyway, it would lead to a paradox, because I'm already under the indirect command of the rod."

"Paradox?"

"You wouldn't understand. What other information do you require from me?"

Hasan took back the rod and studied its design. "I'm having a little trouble discovering the extent of this talisman's usefulness. When I asked to see all the tribes it commanded, they gave me some—"

"That is easily explained, mortal. The rod is designed most carefully to give the owner absolute power over the jinn, and to protect him from the consequences of its use. Believe me, mortal, you *need* such protection! So the kings couldn't show you their legions."

"I don't understand."

"It figures." Dahnash tried again. "Let's say you gave the order and they obeyed. Then you took one look at the horrendous shapes of their minions and went mad from the vision. What use would the rod be to you then?"

Hasan got the point. No wonder it had taken so long to fashion the implement. It had to guard against human stupidity and inhuman ingenuity. But for that, he would already have blundered twice: once in looking upon the mind-destroying jinn,

and once by giving the rod to Dahnash. "Then I can never look upon them all?"

"You could direct them to appear in alternate shapes, such as dancing girls or eunuchs, depending upon your taste."

"Suppose I just tell the kings to carry us all back to Baghdad?"

"Null program, mortal."

"Why not? They're strong enough, aren't they?"

"Certainly—but they happen to be bound by the covenant of Solomon, son of David, which prohibits them from hearing the sons of Adam upon their backs. It's all part of the rod's defensive configuration."

"But you carried me on your back."

"I was operating as an independent agent. Now you have my services through the command of the rod, which means the covenant applies. Matter of Demoniactal Precedent, bin-Bishr vs al-Khawwas, pleistocene period."

Hasan shook his head in bewilderment. "This all seems very complicated."

"Naturally—to you."

"Well, what can these ifrits do for me?"

"O mortal, they can do many things. They can advise, they can fight, they can bring you all manner of riches and banquets, they can foretell the future. There is a variety of ifrit for every purpose."

Hasan brightened. "Well suppose I ask them to predict how I'm going to get back to Baghdad?"

"Negative, mortal."

"But you said—"

"Law of exclusion of self applies."

"What are you talking about?"

Dahnash laughed in his most insulting manner. "Haven't you heard the one about the barber? He bleeds every citizen in the village who doesn't bleed himself. So does the barber bleed himself or

doesn't he?"

Hasan stared at him.

The ifrit sighed. "Take my word for it, mortal—an ifrit can't predict the future when he is himself to be the agent of that future."

The more he talked with this insolent spirit, the more confused he became. "All right. Can you give me any advice on how to get home?"

"Certainly. What made you think I couldn't?"

"Do it, then."

"Make the kings harness you horses of the jinn, that can carry you and your company to your own country."

Now he was getting somewhere. He avoided inquiring why jinn-horses could carry people when the jinn themselves couldn't. "How long will that take?"

"Well, it's a seven year journey by foot, but the horses can make it in less than a year. You'll have to endure terrible perils and hardships and horrors and all the usual, and traverse thirsty valleys and frightful wastes and horrible mountains without number—"

This was beginning to sound familiar. "Can we get safely off Wak, at least?"

"We cannot promise you that, mortal."

"Are you telling me the jinn have no power against common mortals?"

Dahnash looked nettled. "It isn't as though we operate in a vacuum, you know. We—"

"Vacuum?"

"Never mind, mortal. The point is, the rulers of Wak have powerful counteracting magic. For one thing, when one of their weapons strikes one of us, that ifrit is permanently put out of commission in his present form. Those amazon armies are the worst of all. They—"

Now Hasan understood why Shawahi

had not been concerned about their journey through the Land of the Jinn, when the amazons were marching. But now, of course, it was a different matter, since their party was on the side of the jinn and the amazons were the enemy.

"Can you bring us the horses, or do I have to summon the kings again?"

"I can handle it, mortal." And Dahnash struck the ground with his foot and dropped into the gulf that opened under him. "Classy exit, no?" his voice said as the ground closed. In a little while he reappeared leading a fine black horse, saddled and bridled.

Hasan checked the animal while the ifrit went for another. A pair of saddlebags hung from the bow, with a leathern bottle of water in one pocket and an ample supply of human food in the other. Good—it was tempting to order the ifrit to bring them a sumptuous repast complete with servants, right here in the canyon, but it was essential to get as far away from the Queen as possible. He realized that the rod was not an automatic solution to all his problems; it was merely a tool that gave him a fighting chance against the might of Wak.

Dahnash returned with a second horse, similarly provisioned, and Hasan rounded up his party. Sana looked much better; the old woman had done a fine job of restoration and medication. He wondered whether the ifrits could recommend additional remedies, but decided to leave well enough alone.

The third horse arrived. Hasan mounted the first, taking Nasir before him, while Sana took Mansur on the second. Shawahi brought up the rear.

"Dahnash," Hasan said, "you can go now—but come as soon as I call you, in case I need you again."

"I can hardly wait," the ifrit replied

sourly, and whirled into nothing.

Hasan urged his steed, and it began to run with a strong, easy stride. The others followed, faster and faster, until the wind sang past their ears and tore at their clothing.

They were on their way.

All day they fared on the tireless horses, riding through the steep mountains and misty valleys, past leaning palms and giant flowers and jungle-thick vegetation. This was the richest country he had ever seen. The horses seemed to know the way, and their only delay was the need to give Sana periodic rests.

Just before evening a black object appeared far ahead, like a tremendous column of smoke twisting skyward. Hasan's muscles tensed. He recited portions of the Koran and Holy Writ and prayed to Allah for safety from the malice of the Queen. But the thing was *ahead* of them, and he did not dare delay their escape by turning aside.

It grew plainer as they approached. It was an ifrit of monstrous size, with a head like a huge dome and tusks like grapples and jaws like a city street and nostrils like ewers and ears like leather bags and a mouth like a cave and teeth like pillars of stone and hands like giant forks and legs like masts. Its head was in the high cloud and its feet ploughed the bowels of the earth.

Hasan held up the rod, ready to summon the seven kings, for he was certain this creature was not of their number. If the Queen had conjured it to head him off—

But the giant howled and kissed the ground before him. "O Hasan of Bassorah, have no fear of me. I am the chief of the dwellers in this land of the jinn. I am a Moslem, and not many here

are of my faith. I have heard of you and of your coming; when I learned how disgracefully the Queen of the mortals of Wak had treated you, I became distressed at this place of magic and terror, and I decided to leave it forever and dwell in some other region, far from man and jinni and void of inhabitants, so that I might live there alone and worship Allah in peace until my fate ran out. Let me accompany you and be your guide until you depart from Wak. I will not appear except at night, and in this manner you can cover much greater distance and insure your safety."

When Hasan heard this he rejoiced. "Allah reward you well, O noble ifrit! Lead on."

And the towering spirit flew ahead and guided them, a glowing pillar of smoke in the night, so that they accomplished a full day's journey when they would otherwise have had to stop for the night. They talked and laughed amongst themselves, no longer weary, pleased at their deliverance and sure of success.

In the morning they stopped and took food and water from the saddlebags and refreshed themselves. The world looked very good, and Hasan was especially pleased to see how well Sana was doing.

Ahead thrust the mighty conic mountain of the marid that had so alarmed Hasan during the approach to the Queen's city. This time he saw it from the south side, and the landscape amazed him.

They were on the slant of a verdant mountain pass. Close at hand the green jungle vegetation was solid and teeming with life—but it soon fell away to a wasteland of black ash and jagged rock. Ridges of dark material were formed into roughly circular patterns, concave within,

as though the land were an ocean caught in the act of splashing. There was no life at all in this area, and somber wisps of smoke hung over the cauldrons and gulleys. Beyond, the land ascended into the slope of the major cone, a monstrous and sinister mass.

To one side, miles away but made close by the scope of this calamitous landscape, stood the temple Shawahi had spoken of. It was a terraced mound of stone, built tier upon tier to form a wide low pyramid with elaborate arches and decorations lining every level. In the center rose a pointed dome not unlike that of the Caliph's palace in Baghdad. But if the dome were of similar size—and while distance made certainty impossible, Hasan thought it was—the temple itself was many times the size of any structure in Harun al-Rashid's empire. It dwarfed the dome completely.

How many centuries had it taken to fashion this temple? Or had the labor been done by the jinn? He started to ask Shawahi, but her attention was elsewhere.

Behind them appeared an ugly dust cloud that walled the horizon along the ridge of the hill as far as the eye could see and darkened the day. When Hasan saw this he turned pale, not even having to conjecture what kind of host could raise a cloud of dust even in the moist jungle.

A frightful crying and clamor struck their ears. "O my son," Shawahi said, "this is the army of Wak, that has overtaken us in spite of our haste. The Queen will soon lay violent hands upon us."

"What can we do, O my mother?"

"Summon the kings of the jinn. This time they will have to fight, and we must pray that their power can prevail against that of the Queen."

Hasan struck the earth with the rod. The ground broke open and the seven kings rose up to stand before him again.

"Can you stop the army of Wak?" Hasan asked them.

Giant heads turned to contemplate the pursuing cloud. "Master, we can try. But the forces of Wak are the most powerful array on earth, and our magic is as nothing against this. The Queen has potent counter-spells. We shall have to fight them hand-to-hand."

"Is there any way we can escape without doing hattle?"

"No, master."

Hasan sighed. "Meet them, then. Turn them hack if you can, but kill them if you must. I commit the matter to your hands."

"Master, we shall have to summon our entire horde. You must go far up the mountain, so that the sight of our minions does not harm you and you are safe from the carnage of hattle. We know you are right and the Queen is wrong, and this gives us strength—but the conflict will be cruel."

"I understand. We'll go to the temple there."

"No!" cried Shawahi. "All the records of the empire are there, and the priests are loyal to the Queen. The moment we set foot in it, we'll be in her power."

Hasan turned his eyes duhiously toward the cone. "There?"

The giant ifrit who had guided them appeared. "O mortal, do not go near that mountain. I am the chief of all the jinn of this land, excepting only those of the seven kings," he paused to nod at the standing royalty, who returned the gesture with aloof courtesy, "but I have no power *there*."

"I don't understand," Hasan said. He wished he didn't have to repeat himself so

frequently.

"The kings govern forty-nine jinnish tribes of the world," Shawahi explained, "while the chief has authority over the local spirits. But the mountain is the home of Magma the Marid."

"I think you told me that before." Hasan didn't see why that should be so significant.

"A single marid has more power than all the creatures of the Land of the Jinn," the chief said.

"And all our kingdoms too," the kings added.

"And the forces of Wak," Shawahi said.

Hasan looked at the cone with dubious respect. "All that in one little mountain?"

They nodded gravely.

"Well then. Why don't we ask Magma for help?"

The kings stood around and shuffled their feet like small boys, and the chief averted his face. Even Shawahi seemed to be at a loss for words.

Hasan had a suspicion he was being stupid again, and it made him angry. "All right! Kings, go set up for your hattle. I'll have Dahnash hring me progress reports." They vanished. "Chief, if you want to help, you can set up a personal guard for the women and children so they don't get hurt in case there's a breakthrough." The chief vanished. "Dahnash!" The ifrit appeared.

"A regular little Caesar," Dahnash remarked.

Hasan drew him to one side. "What's the situation with the marid of the mountain?"

Dahnash looked at the cone and edged away. "Well—"

"You were the one who told me all about marids. How they sink ships in the

sea and blow away cities with a single breath. Now tell me one about this Magma."

"Mortal, maybe we'd better move away a space while I explain. No sense asking for trouble."

Hasan restrained his impatience and got his party moving toward a mountain overlooking both the temple and the cone, and commanding a good view of the black plain between them where the kings were already conjuring legions into existence. He was at a loss to comprehend this reluctance on the part of the ifrits, who should have little to fear from one of their own number.

"I told you about the five orders of—" Dahnash began. "Yes, I'm sure I did. Well, the power of the groups varies exponentially, not arithmetically, and—"

"I wish you'd speak intelligibly."

"Yes, mortal," Dahnash said, frustrated. "Every group has its specialized members, and likewise the marids, but they're not so limited. Most of them used to be gods, you know. In modern times they've been demoted—but they still pack plenty of power."

"Now take Magma. He's mostly a fire spirit, now—but he can tear up the air and shake the ground something awful, too. If he were closer to the ocean, he could make a wave that would swamp every city on the coast. I mean, he's got power, straight, raw elemental force. He doesn't have to pussyfoot with inertia and centrifugal dynamics the way ifrits do. He—"

"Get to the point," Hasan snapped, still unwilling to admit that he couldn't follow many of the ifrit's terms. "Why can't we ask him to help us stop the Queen?"

Dahnash stared. "Ask him to—mortal, are you out of your mind?"

Hasan waited in stony silence.

"Mortal, I've been trying to tell you. Magma is a *marid*. That's no ordinary spook. He doesn't *help* people."

"Well, what *does* he do?"

"He sleeps."

Hasan took a deep hreath. "I mean, when he isn't sleeping?"

"He destroys."

He was getting nowhere. "You're telling me we'd better leave Magma strictly alone?"

"I'm telling you."

"Then I'd better appoint someone to see that he remains undisturbed. The battle may get a little noisy, and it's right on his flank." He looked at Dahnash.

The ifrit retreated. "Now hold on, mortal. I wouldn't dare go near—why, he'd abolish me like so much imagination if—"

The chief appeared. "I will watch him, Hasan. Magma knows me. I can probably look down his chimney every so often without bothering him."

"Good. You keep me informed on Magma, and Dahnash will keep track of the progress of the battle." Hasan had discovered that he rather liked the feeling of generalship.

Chapter Twelve

By noon Queen Nur al-Huda's troops were ranked upon the plain. They were, Hasan noted with surprise, largely male; only the Queen's elite personal guard was amazon. Columns marched over the hill in seemingly endless array and spread like flowing water across the field, armor and weapons glittering. But once in place, the battle array opened in a monstrous flower, the bright shields countless petals, spears like—

A flower! Hasan had marveled more

than once at the dircular rafflesias, like bowls three feet or more in diameter, containing a central cluster of stamens. The were beautiful, from a distance—but perfumed like offal.

One of these was growing on the plain. Five circular phalanxes, each massed with hundreds of footmen, clustered around the outside: enormous leaves. A circular column represented the outer rim of the hlossom, and a smaller circle way the inner disk. In the center stood clusters of men with spears held high, the stamens: twenty-five groups in the largest circle, fifteen more in the medium circle, five in the smallest.

The amazons stood in the very center, protecting the Queen.

The army of the seven kings, in contrast, was a motley horde. From this distance it was impossible to distinguish individual features, hut Hasan could tell that the majority of the creatures was grotesquely unhuman. Some were small, lie warty toads and hairy spiders; others were enormous, like warty rhinoceroses and hairy ghouls; the remainder was similarly repulsive hut less describable.

The ifrit organization had no beauty. There seemed to be no discipline, no unifying pattern.

It seemed so wrong to he on the ugly side. Hasan felt guilty, and he knew that Sana, standing heside him in silence, felt it too, for she turned away and entered the tent the ifrits had provided. Mansur, the younger hoy, went with her, but Nasir stayed outside to gaze round-eyed at the preparations.

"We'll tear up that stinking flower soon enough," Shawahi said with grim anticipation, and Nasir clapped his little hands and grinned.

Dahnash appeared. "They are sounding the charge!" He vanished.

There in the ravaged landscape the ravage of hattle hegan. The clotted mobs of the ifrit army charged upon the living flower. Hasan saw the outer leaves sway as though ruffled by a cosmic hreeze, then bend and dissolve into individual contests. He heard the clash of weapon upon claw and spear upon shell.

Dahnash appeared. "Enemy units engaged," he announced. "Agressor casualties heavy; ours moderate."

"Wait!" Hasan yelled before the ifrit left again. "I can't follow all that. Isn't there some way I can see the battle for myself?"

"Mortal, it isn't safe. One of our own dogfaces might snap you up accidentally."

"Couldn't I wear the cap and ride the hack of one of the chief's ifrits? No one would know I was near, and the covenant doesn't apply to his subjects, does it?"

Dahnash remained doubtful. "The flak is pretty heavy...."

"Let me do it!" Shawahi said. "I haven't got so long to live anyway, and I'm an expert military observer. Give me the cap."

Hasan agreed reluctantly. He wanted to see the action himself, hut Shawahi was right. She could learn a lot more in a short time than he could. He handed her the cap.

She selected a flying ifrit and was off. Hasan noticed that all of the ifrit remained in sight, though the old woman was totally invisihle. Apparently there were limits to what contact with the cap-wearer would do. A small object disappeared, hut not a second individual.

Another thought came. He had missed the obvious again! Why not—

"It wouldn't work," Dahnash said. "The chief's ifrits are bound to their homeland. They couldn't carry you

home."

The outer leaves of the flower pattern were now locked in turmoil. It was impossible to tell from here who was winning or even what was happening. Was war always as confused as this?

The chief appeared. "Magma is sleeping restlessly," he reported. "I'm afraid the noise of the battle is irritating him."

"Can't be helped. We can't withdraw now." Secretly, Hasan hoped the marid would wake. He wanted to see what would happen. But he also knew that this was a foolish desire. He was getting blasé about magic, and that could be a fatal attitude.

Shawahi's ifrit came in for a landing. "What carnage!" the old woman exclaimed when she appeared, not at all put out. "Our champions are locked in deadly combat with theirs. Heads are flying from shoulders, trunks are falling, blood is flowing in rills, and arms and legs are floating about disconnected. Beautiful!"

"I want to see!" Nasir cried.

"But who is winning?"

She thought for a moment. She evidently hadn't considered the matter. "I think we have the advantage," she said uncertainly. "It's rather confused in the melee...." Then her face lighted. "But you should see those jinn spout flame from their nostrils! That engagement is a—"

"A real scorcher," Dahnash said as he appeared. He was gone again.

Nasir jumped up and down. "I want to see! I want to see!" Hasan decided the boy would never have made a Buddhist.

All afternoon the conflict raged. Gradually the lovely flower on the battlefield broke down, as first the leaves withered and then the outer circles of the blossom dissolved. But the ranks of the

jinn were thinning also, and Hasan knew the issue wasn't settled yet.

At dusk the two hosts drew apart, and at either end of the field the flickering campfires blazed. It was beautiful—but the night breeze also brought the stench of gore. Dim light flickered as well from the smoke above the mountain. Magma was rolling about, perhaps annoyed by the odor.

The more distant mountains ringed the entire scene in somber evening splendor. How could such an ugly situation be so beautiful!

The seven kings reported to Hasan. "They will not withstand us more than three days, for we had the better of them today. We took two thousand prisoners and slew numbers beyond counting."

"How many did we lose?" Hasan inquired.

The kings looked embarrassed. "About the same number—but our army is larger than theirs."

Hasan was reassured, but Shawahi shook her head and said nothing.

The kings returned to their troops. The chief's guard set up sentries, while the majority slept on the ground. This surprised Hasan; he hadn't realized that ifrits had to sleep too, though it made sense when he thought about it. He retired to the tent and spent a night in Sana's arms like none he remembered.

The lovely flower bloomed again in the morning. Once more the ifrit horde engulfed it like a savage carnivore—anomalous as the concept might be—and drenched the plain with blood. Again Magma the Marid tumbled fretfully in his sleep, puffs of steam and ash signaling his displeasure as surely as the chief's steady reports. But Dahnash brought indications of a favorable

outcome, and Hasan, rested and vigorous for the first time in days, was happy to agree.

Only Shawahi was worried. "The amazons have not yet fought," was all she would say when pressed.

By afternoon the melee on the plain was subsiding. Scattered battles now showed where before there had been a continuous press, and corpses, human and bestial, were piled in grotesque mounds. The sides appeared to be evenly matched. It looked as though there would be few survivors of either army on the plain tomorrow.

But the chief's warriors had not even tasted battle. Many of them were disappointed, but this was where Hasan saw their real advantage. If any of the Queen's troops survived, he could wipe them out with a single foray from these reserves. There had been no need to worry.

Sana came out to watch the finish, smiling. "I'm glad it's over," she said. "I don't like fighting—and Huda is my sister. She'll go home now."

After everything she's done to you, you can say that?"

"Well, she's Queen, and has to do what she feels is right."

Hasan looked at the bruises that still showed on Sana's face. Yet he knew that forgiveness was in her nature. How could she have married him, otherwise, after the way he kidnapped her?

Something else occurred to him. "You say she'll go home now? Surely she is dead."

"No, my husband. See—her circle is not on the field tonight, yet it was unbroken today."

She was right. Where had the Queen gone? Had she fled to her city before the battle ended, to escape capture?

The seven kings reported again at dusk. "Master, the field is ours," they said. "We have routed the army of Wak, though its mistress escaped us."

"So I noticed. Well," Hasan said, thinking of his wife's sentiments, "she can't do us much harm by herself. All we want is to be left in peace to finish our journey. Tomorrow we'll—"

He was interrupted by an outcry from the defensive perimeter. Helmets and shields were advancing upon their camp in a compact mass.

"The amazons," Shawahi said. "She held them in reserve."

Suddenly the hillside was lighted with the flame from the mouths of fighting jinn. Hasan saw the enemy: armored ranks of women, the same troops he had accompanied to Wak. Now they were fighting, not traveling—and he was on the other side.

More ifrits appeared as the chief rallied his reserves. There were many of them—great animal shapes and creatures never seen by man. But though their rush seemed irresistible, the surging helmets of the amazon task force swept steadily closer.

Hasan hastily ordered sword and armor and put them on. Shawahi, veteran that she was, had never removed hers. Sana donned a tunic of finely woven metal, and even the two little boys were happily outfitted for defense. Hasan summoned Dahnash and set him to guard Sana and the children.

"But my love—where are you going?" Sana cried, holding him.

"I have to fight."

"Fight here. We shall all be lost if you die out there in battle."

Hasan was not afraid. He had always though he would be terrified to face professional troops in combat, but the

violence of the past few days and his present responsibilities as commander of the jinn and protector of his family inured him to the qualms he might once have had. He was ready to fight, to overcome, to kill—and if need he, to die in defense of those he loved.

Assured of this, he found he had the courage to stay back from the thick of the fray and stand guard over his family. There was nothing he had to prove.

The clamor and carange pushed closer. Peering out into the night, he could see the potent arm of the enemy line reaching toward the center of the camp, cutting down everything that sought to block its advance. Shawahi was right: the amazons were a different breed from ordinary troops. The Queen had neatly engaged and neutralized the forces available through the rod before making her serious attack. Just when he had thought the battle was over, the real encounter had begun.

He saw a single amazon, pert and agile in her armor, attack a ponderous animal-ifrit twice her height. Its gleaming dagger-teeth clashed together like steel striking stone. The ifrit rose upon two muscular hind legs, balancing against its mighty tail, small front legs almost hidden beneath its monstrous head. Red eyes flared, mottled gray jaws gaped. It roared with the sound of fifty wounded tigers and brought its open mouth down upon the woman, an orifice big enough to engulf half her body at a single bite.

Her sword flashed. The tip of the creature's tongue dropped meatily to the ground. Her spear flew out and buried itself in the ifrit's distended belly. She leapt upon it as it toppled and kicked with metal-pointed toes at its eyes. One of its awful hind feet came up to rake her body. Her armor tore free as though it

were paper, and blood flowed richly down her side, but she slit its throat and went without pause on to the next opponent.

No man Hasan had seen could have done it—yet this was just a single encounter among hundreds. And he was on the other side.

One after the other, the ifrits came and died. Some were like outsized rhinoceroses, carrying curved wraparound bone-armor on their heads many feet across, with three devastating horns rising from the center. Others were low and flat, armored all over but with sharp spikes sticking out in rows and with crushing maces on their tails. Still others were giant birds, with stubby wings and heads that crunched off arms and feet with every peck. But terrible as these forms were, most of the quivering bodies mounding the area immediately before the tent were ifrit bodies, and most of the agonized dying screams gurgled from ifrit throats.

They screamed a long time, for though the ifrits could be destroyed, they could not die completely.

Breakthrough! And the battle had come to Hasan. He clapped the cap upon his head so that the enemy could not see him and laid about him with the sword. Shawahi took her place beside him on the left, adroitly keeping her sword away from the seemingly empty space he occupied, and Dahnash took the right. Now there were no sour comments from the former and no smart remarks from the latter. The moment of decision was upon them all, and the odds, truly revealed at last, were against them.

Shawahi was old, but she had trained these amazons for many years. She was still a match for any one of the savage women. Dahnash, for all his impertinence, turned out to know how to

use a sword when he had to. He was not a firebreather—smoke rings were all he could muster—but he was sharp-eyed and agile and he loved his present shape well.

Hasan had had good training under the tutelage of Eldest, back on Serendip. He knew how to cover his vulnerable spots and wait for proper opportunity before wasting a stroke. With the enormous advantage of invisibility, he should have had easy success.

It was not to be. The amazon facing him was tall, strong and skillful. Though her helmet covered most of her hair and part of her face, her features were as delicate and fair as those of a girl just blossoming into womanhood. Though her shield and armor covered all of her torso, Hasan could tell by the necessary shaping of it and the movements of her body that she had a figure to drive a rutting sultan out of his mind.

It was very difficult to strike such a woman with malicious intent.

Hasan hesitated, but she did not. She blinked once, prettily, when he put the cap on; then she whirled her sword in a dazzling arc before her, trying to cut him down before he could move. He parried with his shield, almost thrown off balance by the genuine force of the blow—but immediately she was slashing from the opposite side, forcing him to parry again and thus reveal his position. These girls must have been warned about the cap, and the uncertain nature of the illumination evened the odds considerably. Hasan could see her only vaguely when the torches of ifrit breath subsided, and her movements were so quick and her attack so swift and sure that he had no opportunity to avoid her blows and thus hide himself effectively.

Her sword clanged against his helmet, knocking it askew and smashing the

metal against one ear. He was unhurt, and the cap, by a miracle, remained in position, but this forced him to realize the danger he was in. The next swing might contact his neck instead, and sever his invisible head. She knew his size and defensive posture, and could and would destroy him by aiming her slashes where his vulnerable parts ought to be.

"Hurry, Hasan!" Shawahi cried. She knew what was holding him back, and how fatal this hesitancy could be. The gap was widening; more amazons were filling in behind the first three. A giant corpse was in view: Hasan recognized it as the immortal remains of one of the kings, honoring his commitment to the rod to the end—defunct at the hands of these same feminine warriors. This was no game he was playing, no polite demurrer of the fairer sex; this was his life and the lives of his loved ones, and the figure before him was not a damsel but his enemy.

Hasan threw himself down flat on the ground, knowing that what would be suicidal when visible was a winning tactic now. The amazon almost lost her footing as her sword whistled through empty space. He caught her shapely toe and yanked. The metal slipper came off and she fell. He kneeled, took his sword in both hands, and smashed the edge across her exposed ankles.

He was sick when her feet flew off—but she gave him no time to think about it. Her body flexed and she was on her knees, her blade slicing into his shoulder. The fine ifrit armor halted it, but not before she gouged a painful chunk from the muscle next to his neck. His shield dropped for an instant as his arm was paralyzed, and the point of her sword jammed into his breastplate. Too low—but had she been able to see him,

that blow would have skewered his neck. She was rapidly bleeding to death, but she meant to kill him yet.

Hasan aimed carefully and plunged his sword point through her face.

She fell back, blood spouting horribly as his blade came free—but even then she made no sound, and her two hands came up not to clutch at her own face, but to claw at his. One razor nail ripped into the corner of his mouth; then, at last, she died.

Three more amazons were descending upon him. Their expressions showed both beserk fury and alert awareness of his position and advantage. Only death would stop them.

He fought barbarously, using his invisibility in whatever manner it could be used. He knew now that he was no match for an amazon in fair combat, and that they gave no quarter and outnumbered him. He bashed against them with his shield and kicked at their feet, and when one fell against him he flattened her face with a mailed fist, and when one fell away from him he rammed his spear up under her metal skirt.

Still they came. Hasan fell to the ground, weary and smarting from numerous injuries. Beautiful warriors trod over him, thinking his unseen body a corpse. The tents burst into flame, and he heard the screams of his children.

He scrambled up, finding new strength. Shawahi and Dahnash were still fighting a rearguard action, limned against the flames, but they were beset by crowding amazons. A second scream soared from the flame.

It was Hasan's turn to beserk. He was never able to remember what he did, nor did he care to try, but two amazons writhed on the ground in agony behind him while he charged through the sheets

of flame.

The heat blinded him. "Sana! Nasir! Mansur!"

There was no answer. He stumbled over a body, dropped to the earth beside it, and found that there was still air to breathe next to the ground though the flames raged over his head. He touched the prone figure and felt blood and a female shape. "Sana!"

But it was an amazon, slashed and burned. His own head was burning, and he pawed at it until the blazing cloth fell away. Now he could see that this woman's face was lovely even in the pyre. He recognized the royally born damsel Shawahi had offered him that day the army bathed in the ocean, so long ago. Never again would she charm men with her splendor or laugh amid the friendly waves.

Perhaps he had been the one to kill her.

Hard hands grasped him from behind. An animal sound came from his throat as he struggled to free himself, but the grip, was huge and tight. "I'm on your side, Hasan," a voice grunted in his ear. "Had you not lost your cap, I would not have found you in time."

It was the chief. They leapt into the air, leaving the flames and the horrors they enveloped below.

"My wife! My children!"

"I carried them to safety," the chief said. "They screamed when I picked them up, just as you did, but there was no time to reason with them."

Limp relief washed over him. His family was safe!

"Put me down and fetch Shawahi!" he said, surprising himself.

"I have already assigned a minion," the chief reassured him.

They gathered in a dark gully near the

conic mountain. "This is not safe," the chief said, "but there was very little time. The Queen has won the day."

Not even Dahnash cared to point out that it was night.

"But what of the seven kings?" Hasan said.

Four shapes appeared. "Our brothers are gone," the remaining kings said sadly. "Our troops are vanquished, our magic abolished."

"I have only what you see here," the chief added. No more than a dozen bedraggled ifrits remained.

Hasan made a formal head count. Beside the five mortals, there were the chief, the four kings, Dahnash and the chief's remnant. Hardly more than a score, of the thousands who had gone to battle so proudly two days before. But if the Queen's forces had been similarly ravaged—

Torches glimmered in the distance, and there came the sound of marching feet. Dahnash flew into the night.

He was back in a moment. "She's got a full division left," he said. "I'm glad they don't make female ifrits like that!"

"Take us away from here!" Hasan said to the chief.

The chief shook his head. "Hasan, my last flyer broke his wing transporting the old woman, and the kings are forbidden by covenant to carry the sons of adam. I am the only one who can do it—and though I can take you anywhere, I can carry only one of you at a time, or the two children."

Hasan exchanged glances with the two women. "Take the children to my mother in Baghdad. The rest of us will stay and fight."

"But that will take me many hours, even days if I keep low enough to maintain their warmth. You can not hope

to withstand the force of Wak and the magic of the Queen without my help."

"Take them!" Sana cried, tears streaming down her face. She gave each boy a final hug and kiss. Hasan did the same, and so did Shawahi.

The chief looked at them sadly, then took a boy under each arm. They screamed and cried, not wanting to go, but Hasan signaled the ifrit away and put his arms around each woman.

Sana sobbed openly as the chief disappeared into the sky and the cries of Nasir and Mansur dwindled in the distance. Even Shawahi shed a tear. "Is your mother a gentle woman?" Shawahi inquired.

"She is very like yourself," Hasan said.

The marching torches descended the hillside and spread out below. The gully was some distance around the cone, so that the amazons had to cross the plain to reach it. Their torches circled and formed once more into the terrible flower pattern, glowing and swaying in the night, a signal to the world that the Queen had won and would have her revenge. How could he ever have thought it beautiful!

"Why does she pursue us?" Hasan murmured, unable to take his gaze from the menace. "Doesn't she know she would never see us again, if she let us go?"

"You are a handsome man," Shawahi said. "Did you not know?"

Hasan mulled that over in his mind, but could not make sense of it. "How long will it take them to reach us?" he asked Dahnash.

"An hour, mortal—no more."

"How long can we hold them off?"

"A minute," Shawahi said. "I trained those troops. Nor can we flee or hide from the Queen's magic."

"It is in the hands of Allah, then." But somehow he felt that Allah's will was far

removed from Wak. It would take a miracle to vanquish the Queen, and Hasan's life deserved no miracle.

If only Uncle Ah or the Black Shaykh were here to advise him! There must be some avenue of escape.

The Shaykh! Hasan still had a pouch of incense to summon him!

"You!" he called to one of the waiting ifrits. "Can you make a fire?"

"Yes, master," the creature said. He shuffled forward—a six-foot lizard with tusks.

"Good boy!" Hasan patted the scaly head. "I am going to sprinkle some powder and say a few words, and I want you to burn it up."

"Yes, master," the ifrit said. This one didn't seem overly bright. Probably it was actually one of the lower orders, a jann perhaps. But he needed fire, not brains.

He took the perfumed leather pouch and shook a little of the powder into his palm. He flung it away from him—not entirely trusting the firedrake's aim—and sang out "Burn!"

A jet of fire shot from the lizard's mouth, igniting the powder in mid air. "Abu al-Ruwaysh!" Hasan shouted.

The Black Shaykh stood before him. "Wake Magma," he said, and vanished.

"But—" But Hasan protested to emptiness.

"Wak is out of his territory," Shawahi said. "I have heard of him. He can't violate his covenant with the old King of the Isles."

Hasan was disappointed. He had hoped the Shaykh could help them. "All I wanted was advice how to save our lives. Just a few words." He paused, nursing his hurt. "Wake Magma?"

Shawahi looked at the smoldering cone, then down to the advancing flower of torches. "Even against her, I hesitate,"

she said. "But there is no other way. If the Black Shaykh advises it—"

This development did not dismay Hasan unduly. His curiosity about the marid might be satisfied after all. He hoped there would be a spectacular display. "How can we wake him, if all the sounds of hattle couldn't?"

"Magma isn't very sound asleep now," Dahnash said. "That hattle irritated him so much that any little thing might jog him alert."

"Like a rock down his chimney?" Hasan inquired softly.

"Ho mortal! You said it!"

There was a silence. Dahnash began to look nervous. "Now just a moment—"

"Who else can do it? You're the only flying ifrit left."

Dahnash paced about uncomfortably. "But Magma is a *marid*. If he caught me fooling around his—"

Sana and Shawahi added their stares.

Dahnash was distinctly unhappy. "I suppose I'm under orders."

Sana reached up and kissed him. The days of hope since their escape had done much to restore her beauty. "Too bad they don't make female ifrits like that," Dahnash said, mollified.

Sahwahi had already located a sizahle stone. "I'll put a noxious spell on this so that it will explode with the foulest of stinks," she said. "That should make him rumble."

"When Magma rumbles, that's a *rumble*!" Dahnash said, recovering some slight enthusiasm. He hefted the stone. "In case I don't..." He shook his head. "Forget it. I don't seem to have any classic final utterance."

He leapt into the air, steadied his burden, and sailed heavily into the night.

Shawahi turned away. "When a mortal dies, his soul lives on unhampered, until

he is reborn," she said. "An ifrit has no such escape."

"Is there really any danger?" Hasan asked her, surprised at her tone.

"Magma is a marid, just as Dahnash pointed out."

Hasan had no reply. He watched the great cone and wondered what would develop. They were all so *serious* about it! They seemed to be more concerned with Magma's sleep than their own impending murder at the hands of the Queen. Dahnash had told him about fire and red-hot rock and quivering ground, and he had seen some of the smoke himself, but this didn't seem sufficient to do more than annoy the amazon army. What was to prevent them from shielding their eyes from the fire and walking around the hot rock? Even if some were burned, more than enough would remain to wipe out the fugitives.

Of course, a large-scale distraction might enable his party to escape on foot. That must be it.

A tiny speck appeared in the light above the cone. A mote dropped down. Hasan almost thought he heard a faint "Ho ho!"

They waited. Nothing happened.

In a few minutes Dahnash reappeared. "I got away!" he exclaimed, jubilant. "Magma never saw me!"

"Maybe you didn't wake him," Hasan said. Had all the buildup been for this? "We saw you drop the stone, but nothing happened."

"I woke him, mortal. His chimney's clogged, so it'll take him a little while to get going, but I felt him stir when the pebble hit. What a stench! Any moment now—"

The ground shuddered. "See what I mean? You can tell he's alive now, if you just listen. When a marid gets mad, he

broadcasts his mad all over the cosmos. Listen."

Hasan listened. He heard nothing. Even the single earth-shudder had subsided, and there seemed to be no wind or animal noise of any kind.

"I mean with your mind," Dahnash said. "You can feel him in your head."

Another pause. "O Hasan!" Sana exclaimed. "I can hear it!"

Then Hasan began to pick it up. There *was* something—distant, marginal, almost beyond the range of whatever sense applied, but immensely powerful. It came clearer as he concentrated.

A surging liquid reservoir under enormous pressure ... churning gases bubbling through liquid rock ... a long nasal tunnel reaching up ... a massive stone plug holding back the building pressure.

Hasan shook his head. This was ridiculous! Rock was solid, not liquid, and gas was just another kind of air. It could not even *move* rock, let alone bubble through it.

"Magma doesn't follow *your* feeble conceptions," Dahnash said. "If he chooses to bubble steam through stone, he bubbles it. If he wants to set brown earth on fire, he sets it. He's got magic no one else can touch. Listen...."

Hasan listened.

Magma seethed and bubbled in molten fury. For centuries he had slept, puffing out his ashy breath during fragmentary dreams, hating against the warm sides of his liquid hurrow as he flopped over for another nap. But recently there had been cacophony beside his mountain, and rivering blood smirched his sacred domicile. His dreams were disturbed, his temper strained. But for the fact that it was a lot of trouble to rouse himself, he would have blasted away the irritation.

Fortunately the disturbance stopped, and he drifted with lesser anger back to sleep. There was no need for—

A deliberate pebble pinked his nostril. Well, it was a minor matter. Then an odor filtered in....

Essence of rafflesia. Magma hesitated sleepily, deciding how much rage he could spare. The mortals of Wak weren't supposed to bother him. He sent up a current to investigate—and discovered that his nose was largely clogged.

If there was anything the marid of the mountain couldn't abide, it was confinement. The pebble was forgotten as he generated pressure. One sneeze would—

The obstruction held. Magma's sneeze reverberated the length of the chimney and bubbled uncomfortably back through his main chamber. Now his stomach was upset—and he still couldn't breathe.

He belched. The stupendous volume of gas shot upward, blasting against the confining plug ... and turned aside to bathe him in its nausea again. He choked.

Magma was fully awake at last. His rage was towering. That a god should suffer such indignity! He prepared to tear loose on the orgy of the millenium.

The gases, under control now, surged and mounted the chimney, carrying volatile metals before them. They pressed against the unyielding plug. Magma gradually increased the force, ramming more and more substance into the chimney. There was nothing on the earth or in it that would resist the marid's concentrated push for long.

Fingers of gas and liquid bored into the plug. Spirals of Magma's deeper substances animated it, searching, probing, drilling, twisting.

He had hold of it now. Magma threw all his titanic primeval energieis, the power of

which had fashioned the world itself in the old days when he ruled everything, behind the plug.

It blew.

"Cover your eyes!" Shawahi screamed. The ground bucked beneath them.

Hasan clapped his hands to his face, but the blast of light seemed to cut right through them and outline the top of the cone in fire, shooting brilliant fury high into the air.

From Magma's throat came a thunderous roar of triumph. A thick column of incandescent debris shot up, spreading into boiling clouds which flashed now white, now black. The mass of smoke took the shape of the most monstrous ifrit Hasan had ever seen.

No ifrit, that. It was the marid.

Magma roared again, a deafening detonation. Hasan covered his ears, but the sound could no more be stopped than the light, and his ears continued to ring. How could there be more sound from the mountain when the marid had already escaped?

Another roar. They came every few minutes now, and Hasan realized that Magma had only begun to show his strength.

Morning came. Hours had passed, seeming like minutes while they cowered in the gully listening to Magma's wrath. There was no sign of the Queen's army.

Even as the day brightened, the air filled with choking sulphurous fumes. A dense cloud of smoke rolled over, turning the day to night again. The blasts came louder, and the ground shook steadily.

Then there was a stillness.

"Is it over?" Hasan inquired hopefully.

Shawahi and Dahnash stared at him.

"Over? Magma is a *marid*."

As though that explained everything. "Well, maybe we'd better move on before

the Queen finds us."

"Don't worry about the Queen. She'll be busy enough with Magma," Shawahi said, smiling to herself.

They began their trek, however, away from the mountain. The rumbles began again as they did so. "He's spotted them," Dahnash said.

"But why should he go after them, when *we* did it?"

"I framed them," Shawahi said.

An impenetrable swirl of smoke obscured the cone, and lightning flashed from that cloud into the surrounding air. Hot ash rained down upon them, making immediate cover necessary. Hasan was surprised to discover that the particles, though white with heat, could be brushed off quickly from the skin without extreme effect. The party was able to proceed through the strange storm by holding bundles of large leaves overhead.

A wind came up, gentle at first, but rapidly increasing to violence. Dust blew into the eyes, nose and mouth. The world tasted of whirling ashes.

They were in the jungle now, blindly charging through trees and trailing vines. Wild beasts swarmed about them, but paid no attention to the human party. Even tigers and pythons were intent only upon escape. Hasan would have marveled at this unusual camaraderie of living things, if he hadn't had other problems to take his attention.

The explosions resumed, louder than ever. Larger fragments fell from the sky, some the size of human heads.

They traveled desperate miles, but neither noise nor smoke seemed to diminish. The sound of Magma became a sustained roar, deafening the world with its power. Light ash covered every leaf of the jungle trees and carpeted the ground.

At last they could travel no more. Sana

was sobbing and gasping for breath, her face grimed with dust, and Shawahi wasn't much better off. Even the ifrits seemed morose and tired.

Magma's cloud had formed into a pine tree many miles high, the last time Hasan had glimpsed it. He hoped the tree would not come crashing in their direction. All they could do was wait, tired and hungry and afraid.

"I *think* we're far enough away," Shawahi said.

All night Magma vented his fury into the sky. The trees of the forest shriveled and burned, and when the morning came the sun appeared only as a distant bloody ball behind a curtain of sickly yellow.

They ate what they could stomach, drank from the water bags the ifrits were still able to provide, and slept. There was nothing else to do, though the roiling dreams of the marid clothed their slumber in nightmare. Would they ever see a normal world again?

On the third day the earth jumped again with a cataclysmic blast. Hasan was thrown to the ground, head spinning again with the violence of both external and internal rage. He tried to cover Sana, waiting for the hot fragments to smash into the ground, killing whom they would. Magma had multiplied his power manyfold....

Nothing happened.

A stiff wind lifted the smoke and haze to reveal the devastated jungle. Ash was inches deep over everything, and not a creature moved.

But Hasan's mind was empty. Magma was gone.

By mutual consent they traveled back to the mountain. The distance which had seemed interminable through the raining stone now became short. In hours they

were back.

Hasan looked upon the scene, hardly crediting it. The cone was gone; the neighboring temple was gone; even the plain upon which the ifrits had battled the Queen's army was gone, and the protective gully. All that remained was a giant circular valley, a cauldron more than a mile across, wisps of fog hovering above it. Waves of heat still emanated.

"Magma did—*this*?"

Shawahi nodded. "He sleeps again—but he isn't gone. A marid is never gone." She stared wistfully at the place the temple had occupied. "All the records and artifacts of the Wak empire were there," she murmured. "Magma destroyed everything. I wonder if it was not too great a price to pay for the safety of three fugitives."

Hasan didn't know what to say. He felt painfully guilty about his overeager, ignorant desire to see the marid wake. True, the Queen had been a terror—but she was undoubtedly a capable ruler. How could he equate the success of his quest with the destruction of an empire?

They turned away and began to organize for the journey to Arabia. The four kings provided food and horses and a magnificent tent for the party to relax in before undertaking the hardships of travel.

But others had survived the holocaust. The scouting ifrits brought in no less a person than Queen Nur al-Huda and several of her chief officers. They were dizzy and bemused, but her magic had saved them from death. They were all that was left of the magnificent amazon army.

The kings brought Hasan a throne of alabaster inlaid with jewels and pearls so that he could sit in judgment. They brought another of ivory plaited with

glittering gold threads for the princess Manar al-Sana, and a third for Shawahi Zat al-Dawahi. There, near the brink of the disaster wrought by the marid of the mountain, the three awaited the prisoners.

The Queen was pinioned at the elbows and fettered at the feet, but her imperious beauty had not deserted her. She wore a flexible jacket of python-skin, and did not look at all ashamed for the damage resulting from her intractable attitude.

Shawahi was overcome by rage. Hasan had thought she was mellowing toward the Queen, now that the battle was over, but he had underestimated the wrath of a woman who had been betrayed.

"O harlot, O tyrant," Shawahi screeched from her throne. "Your recompense for your despicable deeds which have demolished the accomplishment of an empire shall be to be bound to the tails of two mares who have been denied water until their thirst is burning and who are released in sight of water; and two bitches starved for a week shall be released to follow you and rend your skin. After that your flesh shall be cut off and fed to them piece by piece. How could you treat your own sister with such infamy, O strumpet, knowing that she was lawfully married in the sight of Allah which these two worship? Women were not created except for men and to give them pleasure!"

Hasan looked at Sana, but her eyes were tightly closed. "Put these captives to the sword," he said.

Shawahi agreed vehemently. "Slay them all! Do not spare a single one!" She seemed to have forgotten her earlier laments about the demise of an empire. Slaying the Queen would hardly bring it back.

Sana opened her eyes and spoke to the

Queen. "O my sister, what has come upon us? How can you be conquered and captive in your own country?"

"This is a mighty matter, sister," Nur al-Huda replied, while Hasan listened in wonder. "But it is true: this merchantman has gotten the mastery of us and all our realm. His army defeated ours." The Queen was making no apologies for her defeat.

"But he did it only by means of his cap and rod," Sana protested.

"True—but it was a fair encounter. I am in his power now and will accept his decision. My only regret is that there was ever misunderstanding between princesses of Wak."

Sana turned on Hasan. "What are you doing to my sister? What has she done to you to deserve punishment at your hands?"

"She tortured you. For that a thousand deaths are too little."

"But she had reason for everything she did. Wak does not recognize pagan marriage, nor is a princess allowed to take up with a commoner. But you—you have set my father's heart on fire for the loss of me. What will happen to him if he loses my sister also?"

Hasan looked at Shawahi in bewilderment. "She is young; she has a foolishly soft heart," the old woman said. "Isn't that the way you like her?"

"But the Queen—"

"What does it matter to you? If you want sternness of character, marry the Queen. You can do that now, you know, for you are the first to have conquered her. On the other hand, if you want Sana—"

Hasan bowed to the inevitable. It was easier to get along with women of any age if he didn't try too hard to make them fit man's logic. "It's your decision," he told

his wife. "Do whatever you will."

She clapped her hands happily. "Release my sister and the other captives."

The ifrit kings looked as frustrated as Hasan felt, and Dahnash turned his back. But Sana jumped off her throne, ran to Nur al-Huda and embraced her tearfully.

"O my sister," said the Queen, "forgive me for the malice with which I treated you."

"O my sister, all of this was ordained by fate."

Hasan was reminded uncomfortably of his own early encounter with Bahram the Persian. Bahram had beaten him and treated him miserably, but pleaded for forgiveness when the situation altered. He had trusted the man ... and thereby learned a terrible lesson.

Yet this decision had also led to his discovery of the palace at Serendip, his meeting with the delightful sisters there, and his marriage to Sana herself. He would not change it now if it were in his power to do so.

Was it possible that Sana's foolish forgiveness of her treacherous and calculating sister would also lead to better things? Whatever was fated, Shawahi was right: Sana's beauty had won him, but it was her innocence that held him. Even the princesses of Serendip knew the meaning of vengeance—but not Sana.

Hasan stood, walked to the brink of Magma's chasm, and drew out the magic rod. Fate could no longer justify his possession of it. He broke it across his knee and threw the pieces into the chasm.

"You have given us our freedom," the four kings said. Then each in turn bowed formally to him and disappeared. The horses and supplies remained, and he knew he had done the right thing. It was

the time for generosity.

He dismissed the ifrits of the chief, and trod wearily to the main tent. He was suddenly lonely.

But not for long. Sana joined him presently, and all the ravages of Magma's wrath faded to insignificance amid the delight she brought.

Next morning Queen Nur al-Huda came to him and kissed him with all the distant warmth she could muster. "My sister had told me all about you, Hasan. I know now that whatever your birth, you are an honorable man and a worthy husband to her. I'm sorry that I ever stood between you or caused you trouble in any way." And much as he had thought he hated this woman, he felt reluctant tears of gratitude come to his eyes. Sana was not the only softhearted one.

What was it Shawahi had said about the Queen? That she would not let them go in peace ... because he was a handsome

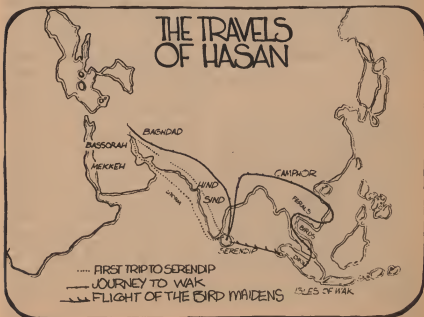
man? Was it possible that she was not so different from her younger sister, after all? Her strange acceptance of defeat....

Shawahi came. Nur al-Huda turned to her. "O venerable mother, I am deprived of all my troops, and no one can train new ones as well as you. Will you return with me and govern my armies again?"

The old woman huffed herself up angrily. "Return with you? I—" Then she paused, looked at Hasan, looked at the Queen, and seemed indefinitely to regain the stature Hasan had observed the first time he met her. Shawahi had been powerful then, but had somehow become ineffective when deprived of her position. All that fell away now. "I think I'd better."

Make that three softhearts, Hasan thought. The Queen was really stronger than all of them, and had prevailed.

The Queen embraced Sana once more while Hasan felt strange sorrow at this parting of the two loveliest women in the



world. Too bad it was forbidden to marry sisters....

Then the Queen and her party rode south, and it was over. Never again would he have adventures to match these.

But Sana was beside him, radiant and enchanting, and it was all worthwhile. There were so many dear friends to meet again, and they would visit them all on the return: the King of the Land of Campbor, the Black Shaykh and his four elderly disciples, Uncle Ab, and of course the seven princesses of Serendip. His heart cheered as he thought of Rose, and he was eager to proceed.

"One minute, mortal."

It was Dahnash. "I'm on my own time now, mortal, so you know it means something," the ifrit said. "I just wanted you to know I've had a change of heart." He paused.

"One man is worth a thousand jinn," Dahnash said seriously. "Provided it is the right man." He smiled, saluted, and faded from view.

As the whirling dustcloud formed, Hasan was sure he heard a distinct "Ho ho!"

—Piers Anthony

A Postscript by the Author:

The story of Hasan is not original with me. What has been presented here is an adaptation of just one of the 169 numbered Tales of *The Arabian Nights*, selected for its general interest and unfamiliarity to the American audience. Those who enjoy this version are encouraged to investigate the original translations, which are more authentic and cover a wider spectrum of history, magic and adventure. I refer to the adult editions; the juvenile versions of Aladdin, Sindbad the Seaman *et al* are best avoided by the serious reader, since they

omit many major tales (such as *Hasan*) and are heavily expurgated. The bibliography following this note calls out the three editions used in the preparation of *Hasan*.

There are differences between our world and that of the *Nights*, as I hope has been evident. The characters presented in *Hasan* are essentially normal for their framework. The young man is not being effeminate upon the several occasions he weeps or faints, nor are damsels being remarkably foul-mouthed when they employ sexual epithets. Even the lapses into verse during moments of emotion are typical of the stories, though I cut the verse by about 95% in deference to modern taste.

The language of the Victorian translations is approximated in this adaptation by the speech in which Rose describes the seven princesses' exile to Serendip and the Queen's letter to her father. I find it beautiful, but fear that the average person today does not. It is my hope that *Hasan* will introduce a certain number of people to the wonders of the original *Nights* who would otherwise have balked at the language of the major editions or the shallowness of the juvenile emasculations.

My adaptation, however, could not stop at language. I discovered repetitions, ambiguities and inconsistencies in the original that could not be allowed to stand, yet whose correction involved some significant deviations from the text. For example: Wak was supposed to be a seven year's journey from Baghdad, which Hasan could cover in one year by magical means. Presuming that that seven year trip was calculated at the fast clip of 25 miles per day, with one day's rest per week and allowances for occasional delays, this comes to about 50,000 miles

in all, or twice the circumference of the earth. This does not seem reasonable. Either the figure was exaggerated or the route remarkably circuitous. I assumed both, and settled on a meander of ten to twelve thousand miles and hazardous geography. But my credulity still was strained, for nowhere on Earth does a single language and culture cover such an area, yet Hasan never met a foreign tongue or differing religion, apart from the nefarious fire-worshiper. (Lest an innocent country be maligned, it should be pointed out that Bahram was not a Persian; he merely claimed to be.) Hasan simply could not venture thousands of miles from Baghdad and meet only Arabian Moslems, and I could not remain faithful both to the letter of the tale and to what I knew of ninth century geography and culture.

There is another interesting aspect. Many of the tales in the *Nights* have a historical basis which is in some respects more accurate than official records. *Hasan* has a number of signals pointing to its geographical derivation. There could have been a "Hasan." Centuries of oral embellishment may have magnified the fantastic elements and eliminated pertinent details, but the puzzle of its origin is intriguing.

By interpreting the landmarks of Hasan's travels in terms of the globe, I located Ceylon, India, the Himalayas, China and Indonesia, and interpolated the points between. The main journeys are plotted on the accompanying map of Asia. After determining the probable route I considered the language and culture of the regions entered. I could not impose Arab tradition upon China and Indonesia, so I assumed that the real Hasan had linguistic and esthetic problems in these regions and described

these despite their complete absence in the *Nights* tale.

It was awkward to present Hasan's Arabic reactions to the customs of southeast Asia, since I had to do so in English for Western readers. Probably egregious errors have been made, since I speak none of the languages of the area and have been to none of the places described. It was necessary to research for most of the information and guess at the rest. Just what is the difference between Ceylon breadfruit, Thai durian, and the mythical crying fruit of Mount Wak? Do cicadas serenade during the Malay monsoon? What do amazons wear on their feet? In what respects did ninth century Buddhism differ from ninth century Mohammedanism (Islam)?

Generally, I tried to portray the lands and peoples as they were, not as Arab tale-tellers thought they were, and to give as modern a flavor as was possible without overt anachronism. I invented motivations and explanations where the tale provided none, and juggled events and places to fit my format. Dahnash the ifrit is a personified background-justification device who speaks only 13 words in the original—yet how else was the modern reader to be entertainingly advised of the extraordinary mythological background supporting the *Nights*? The entire "Magma" scene is my invention, stemming from the triple need to provide a climax sadly lacking in the original, hint at the natural explanation for the entire class of supernatural beings, and offer some explanation for the failure of Wak to survive in Indonesian literature.

The empire of Wak is a representation of one phase of the Shri-Vijayan empire of Sumatra, a center of Buddhist learning of the period. Indonesian records are largely nonexistent for several centuries following

this time, and it has been theorized that some volcanic catastrophe played a part in this oblivion, as it has elsewhere in the world. Indonesia is the most volcanic region known, and the famous later blast of Krakatoa is by no means the only episode of its kind. The soil is rich from volcanic refuse, and legends of such destruction occur all over the South Pacific. Magma, then, is my concession to possible history, while the amazon-ifrit battle is in the tale proper and might easily be the tale-teller's version of such a violent eruption.

Not all translations agree. One version has Hasan escape with his family from Wak by obtaining several feather-suits and flying home, as well as a scatological episode which I have omitted. My adaptation therefore differs no more in outline than the translations do from each other. I have compromised with the supernatural, hoping that the reader will feel free to enjoy this as straight fantasy while appreciating that very little *has* to be fantastic.

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interesting references I ran across, and
make entertaining reading apart from
their research value.)

—Piers Anthony

CREATION

by L. SPRAGUE DE CAMP

That Yahveh manufactured man from dust, the Hebrews tell;
In Hind they said that Varuns had formed him by a spell;
The Norse believed that Odin made the breath of life indwell
His torpid trunk.

Of all Creation legends, though, the one I like the best—
A myth from ancient Sumer, where perhaps the truth was guessed—
Asserts the gods created man one day, in cosmic jest,
When they were drunk.

(continued from page 25)

a claustrophobe's wildest nightmare. It had to end soon, or he would never again understand what had happened to us; he would never again understand anything.

Then, just as suddenly as it had come, the grayness left and we were again inside the control cabin. Pete was still screaming. I found the vibra-pistol, stunned him again. It was the only way to stop his ranting.

Later, when he woke, he sat up, clutching his stomach and shivering like

he had spent a week in a cold rain. I pointed to the board where all eighty-four lights blazed brilliantly. "You're a billionaire again. Although I believe you might want that one illusion removed from the ship's program."

He gave me a sickly grin and ran for the bathroom. I don't think he could have danced at that moment. Not even one lousy pirouette.

—Dean R. Koontz.

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Secret of the **STONE DOLL**

BY DON WILCOX

A Fantastic Classic

Besides being an exciting adventure Fantasy, "The Secret of The Stone Doll" is also of historical interest in light of Frank Herbert's popular "Dune" series period. It is possible that Herbert based his concept of the Reverend Mother on a similar idea Wilcox introduces in this story in embryonic form.

YOU may say that I was a romantic fool for staying on the island of Traysomia. But you never saw Looma.

You may say that I was a madcap to think that I could cast my lot with the natives and learn to live as they lived. You may say that I was overwhelmed by passions that no man with mature sober judgment would entertain—passions that were sure to bring my world crashing down to ruin.

Again I answer—you never saw Looma.

Had your eyes beheld her, as mine did, on that night of the Traysomian funeral, you too might have cast your cool judgments to the winds and allowed your party of seafarers to sail on without you. Can any man weigh his reasons like so many ounces of silver and predict what he would do under strange circumstances?

My eyes beheld Looma. She was young—she could hardly have been more than seventeen. She was beautiful—never have I seen a girl whose beauty was so enthralling.

I stayed realizing that I was probably the only American on the island. I realized that it might be years before another ship from the civilized world came this way. My ship would not return

this way. It was a ship of amateur explorers, casting about over the vast tropical Pacific for lost peoples and forgotten islands. By mere chance the party had come upon the island of Traysomia.

After a few hours of visiting, my companions had rowed back at sunset



to our ship, which lay a mile or two beyond the Traysomian beach. I had stayed. The charm of the Traysomians had captivated me from the first. Then the preparations for an elaborate tribal funeral had engaged my attention. So I had instructed my companions to have the ship wait for me and I would swim out later.

It was the funeral for an old Traysomian woman. I later learned that she had been the wise old woman of the tribe for many years. It was plain that all the people had great affection for her.

Even the Traysomian outcasts, who dwelt across the Lakawog river, gathered in little groups close to the river's edge to pay tribute.

Fires burned at each end of the crude wooden coffin. Red sparks rose into the black midnight sky. The solemn faces of the tribesmen, circled around the fires, glowed darkly.

I sat in the outer circle. A young native whispered to me from time to time, trying in his friendly way to explain the ceremony to me. Many of his words were almost perfect English. Although my companions and I had been unable to trace the racial ancestry of these golden-skinned primitives, obviously their paths had crossed with those of English-speaking peoples.

Through the long night we sat there on the mile-wide beach. To one side of us was the mouth of the Lakawog river, with its little groups of outcasts huddled by their own fires on the farther bank. Around us was the Traysomian village. Its neat little bamboo cottages tucked in among the midnight blackness of the forest flickered with little grilles of reflected light whenever our fires blazed high.

From time to time certain native men would add small bundles of *fulgor* twigs to the flaming heaps. Gradually the

rude coffin and the corpse within it burned away.

"The wind is right," the friendly Traysomian whispered to me. He indicated that the smokes were blowing toward the center of the island. He made certain explanations of why this was right, but his talk went outside the bounds of my vocabulary. Besides, by this time my eyes had fallen upon the lovely girl.

SUCH a strange charm came over me.

I can scarcely describe it. Above the low half-muffled noises of the burning twigs I could hear the voices of the women—priestesses, as I later learned—who made up the inner circle around the fires. They kept up a long musical murmur—and such dreamy voices! On and on these soft-spoken recitations continued, seeming to blend with the magic of the tropical night.

Gradually most of the tribesmen closed their eyes.

But the girl I watched showed no signs of drowsiness.

Her dark liquid eyes seemed to be as alert as the rising sparks that she watched. She scarcely moved, and yet she appeared to be on the verge of action, like a bird caught by a camera as it takes to wing. The flickering light was full on her uptilted face and throat. The wind played through the shower of blue-black hair that draped her shoulder. She was clothed in a simple native dress that clung closely about her full breasts and her lithe shapely body.

Now, as one by one the natives fell asleep, the girl's manner became all the more alert. She rose to her feet slowly, almost stealthily. Her eyes roved over the sleeping throng. For an instant I felt her gaze linger upon me. Her look of suspicion was disturbing. I knew instinctively that, whatever her plan, it was not a part of the regular funeral

ritual. I pretended to fall asleep.

The girl hurried away. She ran. She was out of sight. She had disappeared in the direction of the silent glassy sea.

The faintest gray of dawn was upon the water's surface. I could make out a dim outline of my ship on the right horizon. Far to the left I thought I could see traces of waves out into the mirror-smooth surface—the wake of a canoe, perhaps. Or a swimmer.

I ran to the water's edge. Half a mile out in the vast expanse of gray the girl was swimming. Her course pointed to nothing but the endless ocean. There was no time to look for a boat. I shook out of my surplus clothes and plunged.

It must have been all of an hour later, judging by the rising sun, that I struggled back toward shore dragging the half-drowned beautiful girl with me.

Several Traysomians were on the bank by this time, chattering excitedly. They sent a canoe out to meet us.

"Looma! Looma!" the men in the canoe cried. They drew her in. They made me get in also. We rowed back to shore. All the way Looma was silent. And to my surprise the men did not demand any explanations. I could not understand this at the time, for I had not yet heard of "vling-gaff", the taboo. It seemed to me that the girl's strange conduct would surely get her into a tangle.

"Looma! Looma!" the women called excitedly as soon as we were within hearing. "You are alive, Looma!"

The canoe drew up to the beach. Looma took a deep breath as if summing her energies. She rose and stepped forth gracefully.

"I have come back," she said. Those simple low-spoken words were all. She brushed the water from her hair and eyelashes, smiled and walked away.

A FEW girls followed after her to escort her to her home. Most of the

crowd stood gazing as if baffled by what had happened. One nervous impetuous young native boy came running up and blurted his curiosity aloud.

"What made her do it? Did she want to drown herself?"

"Vling-gaff!"

A dozen persons must have gasped the word at once. The effect was like an electric bolt. Fright shot through the boy's face. He cupped his hands over his mouth. He bowed his head. Slowly he walked away.

The people stood almost like statues, watching the retreating figure. Not until the boy had reached the mouth of the Lakawog river, plunged in, and swum across to the other side to join the outcasts did these people relax.

This boy, as I later learned, had impulsively crashed through the strictest Traysomian taboo. His tongue-slip had implied that Looma had been afraid of something and had sought to escape that something by drowning herself. Such a charge cannot be uttered aloud in Traysomia. The taboo of vling-gaff bans all mention of fear or weakness or defeat.

"But the girl's own actions—" I protested, when a friendly Traysomian tried to explain this matter to me, "—the fact that she was deliberately swimming to her death—doesn't that prove that she—"

"Vling-gaff!"

The friend cut me off so sharply that I never again tried to argue the matter. And gradually I saw that this taboo was a wonderfully effective scheme.

In fact, I bumped into the thing again that very day. The instance was so slight as to scarcely deserve attention; nevertheless it illustrates how all-inclusive this silence taboo is.

I had eaten something that did not agree with me. I started to tell the native who had served my meal that my

stomach wasn't equal to the demands of these exotic native foods. On the instant he had replied, "Vling-gaff!"

Very well, I said to myself, *vling-gaff!* After all, why should I admit this weakness? Henceforth I would follow the footsteps of the Traysomians and enshroud my failures, small or great, in silence.

Again, I felt a growing warmth for the taboo when I learned that all those outcasts who had taken up their abodes on the other side of the mouth of the river had gone there voluntarily, and that they would voluntarily return when they felt that the shame of their broken silence had worn off. The boy who had blurted the words about Looma swam back to the village side of the river, I recall, some ten or twelve days later.

For two days my ship waited for me, sending a boat for me periodically. By this time I had been completely captivated by the charm of these peaceful primitive people and had decided to stay. My seafaring companions would not accept my decision. I commanded them to sail on. They insisted that they would wait a few more hours.

"We expect favorable winds by afternoon," they warned me, on the third morning of my stay.

"Take advantage of them, by all means," I replied.

"If you change your mind, signal us with a white flag. Otherwise, we'll take you at your word." They rowed back to the ship.

I BREATHED deeply of the highly scented tropical air. I seemed to have fallen into the life of a prince. The Traysomians had established me in a luxurious bamboo house with ornamental furnishings. The neighboring families brought me foods. One by one, each of the older and more important men and women of the tribe came to

me and expressed gratitude for my rescue of Looma.

A very dear girl was Looma, they said. Looma was a girl born to a destiny. The tribe was rich, indeed, to have such a girl as Looma.

To me, all these extravagant comments were no more than fair and honest appreciation of Looma. Never, of course, was any mention made of her having voluntarily embarked upon an endless swim.

"We welcome you to live with us as long as the seasons come and go," one of the leading matriarchs of the village told me. This, I realized, was official. It was the elderly women, not the men, who governed this society.

"You shall be one of us, if you will so honor us," said another influential tribeswoman. "Perhaps you will marry among us."

I returned the matriarch's courteous bow, and she turned and walked away. My eyes swept across the wide panorama. A soft breeze swayed the lacy tropical ferns along the line that curved from the forest-tops down to the beach. Peaceful golden-skinned Traysomians played on that beach. Their dark hair fluffed in the rising winds. Far out on the waters my ship was setting sail.

I could see someone on the bow waving a signal flag.

For a moment a little flurry of panic shot through me. I felt a sharp impulse to answer that signal. I started to rise—

Then I dropped back into the comfortable lounge-chair within the shade of the tropical foliage that graced my front porch. Looma was coming toward me.

A faint smile was on the beautiful girl's lips. She sauntered into my presence with the easy grace of self-confidence. I had not seen her, I was poignantly aware, since the morning of her swim. I had never talked with her.

And yet she approached me as if she were an old friend.

In her hand she carried a comb of highly polished shell.

"I bring you a gift," she said softly. Then, as if to illustrate the purpose of the article, she began to comb my hair. I was entertained, to say the least, by her efforts to untangle my matted locks. But before she got through I began to suspect there were not so many tangles as she was pretending.

My ship sailed out of sight. I smiled. The words of one of the old matriarchs echoed in my mind. "You shall be one of us . . . Perhaps you shall marry among us."

CHAPTER II

Traysomian Wedding

THE day before Looma's and my wedding, her brother took me on a long hike into the interior of the island. He showed me the well-beaten paths that cut through this semi-jungle area. Here and there we came upon fellow tribesmen who were gathering fruit or roots.

The well-beaten trails, Looma's brother explained, circled the entire island. He made a rough model out of earth, and from his diagrams I caught the impression that the known portions of the island circled around a mountainous interior something like a hat brim around the crown of a hat.

Eventually we stopped and rested on a low stone wall. I started to step across but Looma's brother pulled me back.

"Not today," he said.

"Why?"

"Because it isn't customary."

I gazed at the wall with some curiosity. It stood about a foot high. The Traysomians had built it of loose stones, evidently many generations before, for

it was in bad repair. It appeared to be endless, extending to the left and right as far as I could see, disappearing in distant shadows.

"This wall marks the boundary between the known and the unknown," Looma's brother explained. "That is why we do not cross it."

I smiled to myself. This was a silly superstition—the savage's fear of the unknown.

"Are there any enemy tribes living in the interior?" I asked.

"No."

"Wild beasts?"

"I do not know. I have never heard of any."

I mused. "Then what are the Traysomians afraid of?"

"Vling-gaff!" he cried. A bad slip on my part. I should never accuse the Traysomians of fear. Truth to say, it was not a consciously-felt terror that kept them from crossing the wall. It was simply the accepted taboo. To cross must have once led to failure or defeat. The rightness of staying on the outside of the fence was not something to be questioned. It was something solidly established in the Traysomian customs, the same as marriage or funeral ceremonies.

"I believe I understand," I said sympathetically to Looma's brother. "Whether or not there are any dangers within the interior, no one shall ever cross this line of stones."

"Except as tribal custom shall demand it," he replied. After a little pause he added, "Tomorrow you and Looma shall cross."

Again my eyes followed first to the right and then to the left, studying the curious ancient wall. More curiously than ever I gazed across it. The topography beyond seemed to be similar to that which we had just traversed: swamp lands flanking the Lakawog

river, flowered *blutanwa* trees, lush green tropical foliage.

"The spring?" I asked.

"It is somewhere beyond," said Looma's brother. "Looma has told you?"

"Yes. When I first talked to her of marriage she told me that she was born with a sacred obligation that she must fulfill. She told me that whomever she married must be brave enough to conduct her to a sacred spring at the headwaters of the Lakawog."

"Yes." Looma's brother seemed relieved to find that I already knew. He mopped the perspiration from his brown face. We wended our way along the fence to a clearing where the afternoon breeze seeped through, and my companion's tense manner eased and he began to joke.

But my own feelings were far from complacent. Instead of allaying my apprehensions, this conversation had aroused them. I felt that the Traysomian ancestors who had gone to the trouble of building that stone fence must have had some good reason for doing so. Moreover, if danger lurked somewhere within that enclosed area, it was a cinch that no Traysomian could give me so much as a hint of what it was. No one knew.

Or if anyone did know—vling-gaff!

As Looma had told me from the first, the adventure required of her by the tribe was a blind one. To accompany her on a journey into the unknown was the price of marrying her.

Very well, no price would keep me from marrying Looma. No silly superstitions or blind fears—vling-gaff! I cut short my thoughts of fear. Fears, defeats, weaknesses were to be purged from my vocabulary henceforth. Silence upon these matters. I was about to become a Traysomian. I would play the game their way.

OUR wedding was held at dawn. The first shafts of light glinted across the sea as the ceremony began. The pink mists across the broad beach melted like magic curtains on a vast stage.

When the weird stringed music from the native dulcimers sounded forth, people appeared from all corners of the village. They moved slowly to the center of the clearing, chanting the wedding song. Soon they were thronged around us.

Looma and I stood back to back. Our bare heels pressed down into the rich scented black soil of the little earthen pyramid which had been built for us the evening before. Looma's head pressed soft and warm against the middle of my back.

A priestess took up the chant. The words were foreign to me. I had learned many of the unmixed Traysomian words during the past weeks, but most of the ritual was made of words little used in ordinary conversations. However, the musical sounds enthralled me, and I was vaguely disturbed to catch hints of mocking and ridicule from a few natives at the outer edge of the throng. Was there some hidden mischief in this sacred ceremony?

Sometimes between phrases of chanting the low undertones of mocking laughter passed through the throng like a wave of water rolling along a rocky coast before a storm. But no faces betrayed more than the slightest hints of this discordant emotion.

At last the priestess was speaking in words I understood.

"You, Looma, are bound to this man. And you, Trodo—" (that was their name for me: Trodo, meaning *the white one*)—"you are bound to this woman."

Looma's body trembled. I caught her hands and held them tightly.

"But remember, Looma, my daughter," the priestess' voice continued, with a shade of stridency in the tone, "the happiness of one or two is as nothing compared to the welfare of all. You have been born to serve—as few are privileged to serve—the welfare of the Traysomian people."

To me these words did not signify anything terrifying. I was surprised that Looma's fingers should stiffen with tension.

"Is anything wrong?" I whispered.

"Nothing," she returned breathlessly. But her fingers broke out of my grip.

Again the music tinkled and the throng chanted. It was not the wedding song now, but the *clostosong*—the chant of the unknown journey. I breathed deeply. The ceremony was almost over. Soon we would be taking that unknown journey—

The final bit of wedding ritual was, I am certain, a ritual of symbolism, although at the time I did not understand it.

All the young virgins of the tribe, other than Looma herself, approached the little fresh-earth pyramid where we stood. Each girl carried a long rope of *blutanwa* flowers. The end of each rope was placed in my hands, and I was told to hold the ropes up over my head.

The circle of girls spread outward and began to weave around us. The ropes of the highly-scented *blutanwas* wrapped around me as if I were a May-pole.

But not around Looma. She was not caught in the interweaving strands. She danced a weird dance down the side of the earthen pyramid, escaping each strand that threatened to capture her.

At last I was bound and the virgins placed the ropes in Looma's hands. I was ensnared. Looma pulled me toward her, laughing as she did so. Again

I thought I heard that rippling undertone of mockery among the male voices; but it was lost under the gayety and laughter of all.

ON impulse I started to administer a bit of ritual of my own. With a quick jerk of my arms I broke out of my bonds and reached toward Looma, intending to kiss her, American style.

Looma, however, gave a swift tug at the ropes that bound my feet, and I rolled to the ground. The laughing crowd bade me roll out of my tangle, which I did as quickly and gracefully as I could under the circumstances.

I emerged to find that the mood of frivolity and merriment had vanished.

Looma was bidding her parents and her friends good-by. There was no talk of dangers, but there were tears and there were throbbing voices. The quick business-like orders of the priestesses and matriarchs attending the details of our departure were mingled with the solemn and intense words of farewell.

We were off at once. That was the tribal command.

A large group from the wedding crowd accompanied us for several miles inland. But when, at last, we came to the little stone fence, they stopped.

Looma and I stepped across and walked on. A song echoed after us. We trudged slowly, listening to the words. Sometimes a matriarch would sing it, sometimes the entire group of women. They were singing to their men, now; not to us.

I caught the words and I did not like them. They struck me with the same discordant note as the ripples of mocking laughter. The words, partly in Traysomian, ran something like this:

The men, our men, our beloved and
constant men

Will still be with us when tomorrow comes.

The rising sun shall find them ours
Tomorrow and tomorrow.

If one must go, let it be one

That we can spare from out of our fold,

That won't be missed from out of our fold,

Tomorrow or tomorrow.

Over and over the plaintive melody was repeated until we were so far away that we could no longer hear it. Then the silence was only intensified by the sounds of our footsteps and the light whisper of tropical leaves high overhead.

CHAPTER III

Madman of the Jungles

WE walked vigorously until the sun was high. Then we stopped by a clear brook, drank deeply of the cool bubbling water, and deposited our luggage for a brief midday rest. Looma started to prepare some food. I spoke to her softly.

"You are my wife now, Looma."

She nodded and her wide brown eyes looked up at me questioningly.

"Do you know how eager I have been for this journey into the land of the unknown?" I said. "To me it is not something to be—"

I was going to say "feared" but I caught myself.

"This will be our honeymoon, Looma," I said smilingly. The word honeymoon probably conveyed no meaning to her. I drew close to her. "I shall always love you, Looma—"

I started to take her into my arms to kiss her. Quick as a little jungle animal she slipped out of my grasp. Her hand went to her belt, and on the

instant she whipped out a small gleaming dagger.

The weapon, not more than eight inches long, flashed sunlight into my eyes. Looma backed away from me three or four steps and stood, breathing hard like a frightened animal. I folded my arms and waited.

"Trodo," she spoke breathlessly, "I am not angry with you."

"No?"

"No. I do not wish to use this weapon—either upon you or upon myself. It is tipped with poison. A touch of the point would bring either of us death—"

"Looma!" On first impulse I almost leaped toward her, to grab the knife away from her. But I thought better of it. Her half-desperate, half-imploping voice held me at bay.

"No, please—you must listen. There is much that you do not understand. Trodo. You must promise not to love me—"

"Not to love you? But Looma, I do love you. I have been terribly in love with you from that first morning—after the funeral—" I stopped myself with the shuddering realization that the taboo of silence barred my way. I must not remind her that she had tried to run away from life. Now, as never before, the tragic conflict that fought within her came home to me. It was this journey that she had sought to avoid—this adventure into the unknown that had been assigned to her at birth. She had even preferred death—

LOOMA turned her eyes away from me. She slipped the dagger back into its concealed case, walked a little distance from me, and dropped down and buried her head in her arms. I had said too much. Without a mention of her fear, I had sent her thoughts bound-

ing back to the event that in itself convicted her of fear.

"Looma, what is it that lies before you? Do you know?"

"I do not know," she answered without looking up.

I moved closer to her, dropped down on the carpet of swamp grass within a few feet of her.

"You must have had some hint of danger—"

"Vling-gaff!"

"That last song they sang, Looma—it practically told me that I would never come back—"

"Vling-gaff!"

"I want to know what's hack of all this, Looma. Before I take you any farther I want to know what I'm getting you into. It's all wrong, Looma. The very fact that they've kept the silence taboo over our journey proves that we're heading for defeat—"

"VLING-GAFF!" Looma sprang up and drew the shining dagger. I thought she was going to kill herself then and there. I bounded toward her. I stopped three feet short of her. The point of the weapon was toward me.

"Don't talk, Trodo!" Her tense whisper was barely audible, as if the last of her breath was gone from her lungs. "Don't say another word. If you break the tahoo again I'll—"

Her words were spent. She closed her eyes, let her hands fall limply to her sides. Her breasts heaved deeply.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm terribly sorry. I won't say anymore. Come. We must have our meal so we can hurry on."

"I'll go on alone," Looma murmured. "You must go back. You have no obligation to the tribe."

She slipped the knife back into the case, picked up the small blue sacred packet which the priestess had given her, and tried to shoulder one of the

two hags of provisions which I had carried. The bag was much too heavy for her. I smiled at her heroic effort, caught her arm, and persuaded her to sit down and rest and eat.

"You say I have no obligation to the tribe, Looma? You are wrong. You forget that I am a Traysomian now. I am your husband. Wherever you go, I'll go too. I am your protection."

It was late afternoon before this bit of conversation was resumed. We had ploughed through miles of marshy lands and had emerged upon a rising sparsely wooded plain. We could see the thin blue mountainous skyline deep in the distance. Somewhere in those distant blue hills Looma would find the sacred spring from which she must drink.

The sight of her goal, distant though it was, had a heartening effect upon Looma. Again she turned to me with the suggestion that I should go back. She was sure that she could make it alone, now that we were through the swamps.

NOTHING could have struck me as more absurd, and I told her so in forcible terms. "I am your husband. I am going with you, wherever you go. I'm a Traysomian, don't you understand?"

Looma shook her head slowly, looking at me with her steady dark eyes. "You do mean it, don't you!"

"Of course I mean it!"

"You seem not to realize that you have been tricked," said Looma with a touch of compassion in her voice.

"Tricked?" The sweat broke out over my face.

"Let us make camp here 'for the night," said Looma. She went about the business of making a fire and preparing the evening meal. I was of little or no help. I sat in a feverish daze, eating my food absently. When we had

finished, neither of us was in a mood to rest. We gathered up our provisions and marched on by the light of the dying sun. It was a red sun, I think; but everything I saw was red.

"How was I tricked, Looma?" I finally mumbled, after my head had lost a little of its fever. "Are you trying to tell me that you do not love me?"

"I am not free to love you," Looma answered. "My life is not my own until I have fulfilled my duty to my tribe."

"Then why did you marry me, Looma?"

"Believe me, Trodo, it was not to hurt you. I like you, Trodo. That is why"—the girl's eyes filled with tears—"that is why it would be better if you would go. Leave Traysomia, Trodo. I want you to have your own life—"

"Looma, why did you marry me?" I repeated.

"It was the will of the tribe that I marry an outsider," Looma said quietly. "If you had not come, our ships would have gone forth to the ports of other islands in search of someone—someone who would be brave enough to conduct me on my destined voyage into this unknown land."

I nodded. At last I was beginning to see where I stood. The events which had befallen me from the day I came to Traysomia all fitted in with the tribal scheme. I was treated like a prince. I was encouraged to marry into the tribe (since my obvious choice was the beautiful Looma). My proposal of marriage was accepted on the condition that I make a journey with my bride to a sacred spring.

Yes, all of those puzzling incidents of the wedding ceremony had their obvious meanings now: the low undertones of amused laughter from the Traysomian males, the admonition of the priestess that the happiness of one or two was as nothing compared to the

welfare of the tribe, the Maypole ritual in which I was symbolized as the victim of the bride, and finally the song which the women chanted after we had crossed the wall—a song of pride that none of their own men would be lost.

"Now you understand," Looma said, "why I was ordered to carry this dagger. Nothing must come between me and my mission for the tribe."

"Nothing will," I responded.

"Nothing," Looma echoed, and to my surprise she was trembling. She caught me by the arms and looked up at me as if imploring for help. "Nothing . . . Not even love."

Something in my heart rocketed and I too was trembling and breathless. "You mean—that you do—"

Looma's lips were suddenly against mine, she was clutching my bare arms in the warmth of her hands. Then, a few moments later, she drew herself away from me.

"I mean," she whispered, "that I must not—I dare not—yield my heart to love until my mission is done. All my life I have been warned, Trodo. I am bound to kill myself rather than break this pledge. I trust you to help me, Trodo."

"I will help you, Looma."

WE had been standing on the crest of a knoll in the deepening twilight. Hand in hand we sauntered on. We walked in silence. Our thoughts were matched to the evening sky—vast, bewilderingly vast, but crystal clear.

A slight rustle sounded from the brush several yards to one side of us. Several times during the day I had been momentarily disturbed by similar rustlings. Occasionally I had wondered whether we were being followed. But I had checked my imaginings with an inward snort of *vling-gaff!*

This time it was not imagination. It

was alive. There was just enough daylight for us to see it approaching.

As between man or beast, it was meant to be a man. But a sorry-looking specimen it was. It was coming toward us. We stopped in our tracks. My small pistol, which I had hoped never to have to use, flipped into my hand instantly.

The man was a white man—perhaps an American, though his features were scarcely discernible, even at a distance of twenty yards. He was a mess of ragged hair and whiskers and rotting clothes.

He carried an old rusty sabre. He took a wide swinging whack at the nearest bush—a gesture which seemed meaningless unless it was meant to convey an impression of power. Then he ambled toward us, swinging the sabre like a weed cutter at the clumps of grass.

Swish—swish—swish! He limped along to the rhythm of his strokes.

By the time he was within ten or twelve yards of us I could see the sharp insane glitter of his eyes. Those eyes were continually shifting. He acted as if he hadn't seen us.

"Who is he?" I whispered to Looma.

"I've never seen him before."

The man came on with his swish-swishing rhythm. He came close enough that the sabre threw blades of grass against our legs. But his course turned away from us just as I was ready to accost him.

"Did he see us?" Looma whispered.

"He must have. Who could he be?"

"I've never heard of him."

A stone's throw away the man's voice broke out in a spine-chilling demoniacal laugh. But he went on. Laughing and singing like a fiend he jogged across the hilltop. For a moment he was silhouetted crazily against the deepening sky. Then he was gone.

THE following day the madman crossed our path again.

His approach was much as it had been the evening before. He seemed to materialize out of nowhere, for we had not heard him following us. Some bushes rustled and there he was, swinging his sabre wildly, limping along with a weird rhythm.

He must have seen my gun. He played cautious. He circled wide around us, pretended not to see us. He was only laughing at the grass he whacked down, I suppose, and singing to hear his own voice. There was nothing that I could single out as actually threatening; but his fiendish voice and the gruesome nonsensical rhymes that tumbled off his tongue were enough to make me want to blast him full of holes.

"Slippity-slappity-slickety-slackety . . . Yoo-hoo! . . . Yoo-hoo!"

Every few steps he would change the shouting and singing to a slightly different version. The words were only garbled childish sounds; yet somehow they bristled with subtle implications of threatening danger.

"Slippity . . . slappity . . . slickety . . . slackety . . . slippity . . . slappity . . . *slipknots!*" (Over and over!) "Cut 'em down! Boil 'em dry! Burn 'em up in *stewpots!*" (Again and again!)

It was silly to allow ourselves to be disturbed. Somehow there was no shaking the thought of him off. He was the only human being we had seen. All of our suppressed fears of this unknown land naturally centered on him.

Hours after he had hobbled away over the hills, his idiotic verses kept running through my ears, keeping time to our ceaseless footsteps.

"Slippity-slappity . . . slippity-slappity . . . *Slipknots! Stewpots! . . .*"

"The silly old buzzard," I muttered to Looma. "Do you suppose he haunts every Traysomian couple that comes on this mission?"

Looma said she did not know. "These missions are so rare. This is the first one in many years. I do not remember the last one. I have been told that it occurred near the time of my birth, and that is why I was destined to be next."

"The old fellow looks as if he might have been here a hundred years," I commented. "From his chatter you can tell that he's soured on the world about something. Maybe he drifted onto Traysomia from a shipwreck."

LATE the second evening when we were about to make camp for the night, Looma declared that she had caught sight of the insane old creature again. She pointed to some outcropping rocks fifty yards ahead.

I fired two shots in the general direction that she pointed. Nothing stirred. We searched around for several minutes but found no signs of him. However, the incident was disturbing enough that neither of us felt at ease. Looma suggested that we hike on and make our night's camp elsewhere, and I gladly complied.

For a short time after the night's darkness swept down we stopped and rested, waiting for the late moon. Then we tramped on. We followed along the grassy thinly-wooded hillsides. Under the shower of orange moonlight we could look down upon the misty purple tree-tops that flanked the black waters of the Lakawog. Another day would bring us to the headwaters.

It was a glorious night to walk under the stars hand in hand with one so beautiful as Looma. Not until the moon

began to descend did we stop for a brief night's sleep.

Long after Looma had fallen asleep I sat, wide awake, watching the moonlight and shadows steal across her lovely face. New thoughts were crowding my mind; new inspirations were pounding at my heart.

Once I tried to sleep; but for all my tiredness I could not. The people of Traysomia were too far behind; their superstitions and childish rituals seemed as impotent as dreams. But the memories of my own ways—those superstition-free ways that had been my life before I came to Traysomia—came shining back to me as clearly as the moon and stars overhead.

If Looma could only see life *my way*—if I could only *teach her—liberate her* from these superstitious bonds that were as futile as black magic—

"Are you awake, Trodo?" came Looma's soft voice.

"Yes."

"What are you thinking about, that you cannot sleep?"

"Magic," I muttered. Magic! That was it—Looma and her people were victims of belief in magic. Looma was to be pitied, being made to come on this long fatiguing journey in pursuit of some non-existent sacred phantom.

"You must sleep," said Looma with a little smile. Then she closed her eyes.

Poor child! Was it too late to emancipate her from her false world? Might I not yet persuade her? Dared I ask her to delay her journey until I had time to teach her that she had been caught in the grip of shabby lies? If she could only see the light—perhaps she would let me build a boat—we could escape this web.

I closed my eyes. Magic. Magic. A victim of magic—

But I was mistaken. Before dawn I was forced to reverse my judgment.

I WAS almost asleep when I heard the footsteps approaching.

They were stealthy, rhythmic, limping steps. They were accompanied by a swish-swish-swish. It was the madman. I caught sight of his approaching form. Silhouetted against the bright blue sky he looked tall and massive. His head was a huge fluffy mass, ragged with whiskers, as he paused against the background of the descending moon.

I leaped up, seized my pistol, and started toward him.

Looma stirred out of her sleep and came up on one elbow. "What is it?" she asked.

"The madman," I answered. "Keep down!"

Then I charged swiftly toward the weaving tottering black figure. "Get away from here!" I shouted. "Get away or I'll blow your addled brain to bits!"

There was a rustle of motion. The madman's arm flew up, his hand released a missile. Something whizzed through the air, fell harmlessly to the ground at the edge of our camp.

I fired a shot into the air. Whether it frightened him in the least I do not know. He emitted a long fiendish cackling laugh and went racing away at a hard limping pace. The sounds melted away in the deep distance—the swish of his sabre at the grass—his gruesome idiotic singsong verses. He was gone.

I hurried back to Looma. She was on her knees, looking up at me. I put an arm around her.

"Are you—all right, Looma?"

"Vling-gaff," she breathed. I had never heard the word spoken so tenderly. It seemed to mean, I am terribly frightened, and yet I dare not say it. "What did he throw at us, Trodo?"

"A stone, I think." I strolled to the other side of our heaps of luggage and picked up a white object as large as a

shoe. "A stone . . . What the devil—" "Let me see."

I brought the object back to Looma. I lighted the end of a *fulgor* twig at the embers of our camp fire to serve as a torch. Under the flicker of light we studied the curious chunk of stone.

"It's a doll!" Looma gasped.

Stone though it was, it had been crudely carved into the form of a woman. The features of the face had been daubed on with clay. The body was partially dressed in scraps of rags, which the madman had evidently torn from his own clothing.

As a crowning detail, the stone doll had hair. Fine white fibers from a thistle had somehow been glued over the head to achieve the effect of a woman's hair.

"He's insane!" I muttered, tossing the doll into one of the provision bags. "Go back to sleep, Looma."

THE girl's eyes searched my face sharply. Her lips parted, then pressed together tightly. She turned her face away from me. I did not know what emotion had suddenly filled her. My own thoughts leaped upon the dreadful word, *magic*! I jumped at conclusions. A doll, thrown at us by this demon of our unknown land, might easily start Looma's superstitious mind off on a dangerous tangent. I must head off that tangent.

"It's nothing but a piece of stone, Looma."

Looma didn't answer.

"I'll throw it away if you wish."

"It makes no difference," said Looma. She kept her head turned away from me.

"It hasn't any *power*—that stone—it's dead—"

"Why should I think otherwise?" Looma asked listlessly.

"But I was afraid you—with your

beliefs—might think it held some magic virtue—or evil—”

“It is only a stone,” Looma murmured. “A dead stone. Not like my beliefs. *They* are living—they have been living for ages—they have grown out of the experiences of my people. They are the truths that we cannot escape.”

She clutched the little sacred package which the priestess had given her, held it tightly to her breast. Her head tilted toward the soft starry skies. For a few moments she was as motionless as a statue, a perfect symbol of the exotically beautiful night. Then, without a word to break whatever strange enchantment had held her, she nestled back to the warm earth and went to sleep.

It was the following morning, while we were breakfasting, that she uttered her only further comment upon the little stone doll. I had happened onto it as I was reaching into one of the bags, had picked it up and passed it over to her.

“Do you want to keep it?” I asked. She shook her head. “Then I’ll throw it away. After all, it doesn’t mean anything to us.” I tossed it aside.

“It had a meaning for the madman,” said Looma quietly. “Are you through eating? Let us be on our way.”

CHAPTER V

Insane Barrier

MY pistol was gone!

We had been hiking briskly for two hours over rugged lands. We had crossed many steep ravines, and I have no doubt that the weapon slipped from my pocket during some perilous climb over precipitous rocks.

“I will wait,” said Looma. “You go back. You will find it.”

“I don’t like to leave you alone, Looma.”

Looma patted her side where the poison-tipped dagger was concealed, and smiled at me confidently. “I will be all right.”

I retraced our steps swiftly. I stopped to peer down into the dark chasms over which we had leaped; I tramped barefoot through dashing rivulets over which I had carried Looma. There were a thousand places where the pistol might have fallen, out of sight and out of reach.

The search was a vain one. At the camp where we had spent the night and breakfasted I plodded about hopefully. All I found was the stone doll, lying where I had thrown it. I clucked it into my pocket. Then I bounded back over the rugged trail to Looma.

The stone doll, I had hoped, might fall out of my pocket exactly as the gun had. Where it would fall would be where the gun had fallen.

No such luck. The doll stuck to my pocket all the way back.

“It is of no importance,” I said to Looma. We hiked on.

As we neared the headwaters of the main stream Looma’s silence became oppressive. Left to my own thoughts I lapsed back into the vain hopes that I might even yet turn her from her purpose.

I spoke casually of the interesting customs of my people back in America. She seemed not to hear me. I mentioned instances of natives from savage lands who had ventured into the American continents and had been so enticed by the civilization they found there that they had never cared to return. Looma only quickened her pace.

She kept a step or two ahead of me. We passed through a light rain. Blustery clouds tumbled along the tops of the low mountains. Fresh winds puffed against our faces, brought to my nostrils the exotic aromas of nameless

mountain flowers. I breathed deeply. It was the breath of an undreamed paradise, it was the breath of Looma's hair blowing back in my face.

We stopped for a mid-afternoon lunch. The sun broke through the puffy white clouds. The Lakawog valley was an artist's orgy of colors—streaks of blues and greens and purples strung together with winding laces of silver and gold.

"Look, Looma!" I said, and the thrill of the discoverer was in my voice. "What a glorious country—and no one living in it!"

"What are you thinking *now*, Trodo?" Looma's quiet murmur was almost accusing.

"Just this, Looma," and I was suddenly clutching her hands tightly, whispering. "In the past hour I have come to realize that I could never persuade you to leave this island, to try the civilization that I have known. You do not hear me when I talk of such things. Very well. But let us face the facts, Looma—"

"What facts?"

"That you and I were meant to love each other—that we are husband and wife. Oh, Looma, if I could just unchain you from this tangle of superstition, you and I could live *here*—in this magic unknown land! It could be ours—"

LOOMA clasped the little blue packet which the priestess had given her. It hung at her throat, a little sacred ornament of colored leather. What it contained neither of us knew, for she was under oath not to open it until she reached the sacred spring. But whenever she pressed it to her breast I knew that my foolish words were powerless to swerve her from her purpose.

"We have only a little farther to go, Trodo. Then it will all be over."

"Yes," I said. *What* would all be over? Did Looma know? Did she mean that this vast hovering ominous danger would be past and gone—that the crisis would be over? Or did she mean that *hope* would be forever gone?

"Are you afraid, Trodo?"

"Vling-gaff!" I ejaculated.

Looma smiled and slipped an arm across my shoulder. "That was what I wanted you to say, Trodo."

The pride that glowed in her eyes was good to see. I knew the tortured feelings behind that mask of pride. There were too many subtle evidences that she was fighting invisible tensions. What she feared now lay less than an hour's journey before us. And she was glad that I could blanket our inescapable emotions with *vling-gaff*.

But the Traysomian word I had uttered had strange reverberations upon me. Vling-gaff! I had blurted it on the instant. It was a part of me. The logic of this strange taboo had somehow penetrated the depths of me, had fastened itself upon me to stay. I would never lose it, not as long as I lived . . .

The spring!

Those faint sounds of bubbling and gushing grew louder with every foot of our progress up the little canyon. Suddenly it was before us, a dashing noisy little cascade of water that spurted from a bold wall of purplish-brown rock. It raced down to a crystal pool and scampered on to form the main stem of the Lakawog.

No wonder that spring had been made sacred. There was a haunting mystery in its rhythmic sounds. Its music would come and go. Sometimes it was full of the voices of little children laughing. Then it would hush, as if the playful little imps were up to some mischief. Next, the teasing voices would melt away, there would be a moment of soft moaning, followed by a low sullen

solding voice of old age. And again—laughing children.

We both drank deeply. For a few minutes we rested, listening, wondering.

We ascended to the top of the rock cliff high above the spring, stood hand in hand. Looma's fingertips were icy. Her body was trembling. I was carried back to a similar moment during our wedding ceremony. Then, the sea had stretched before us. Now it was the fathomless Lakawog valley. Then, the great unknown land had been behind us. Now—a cave!

Looma opened the little blue leather packet which the priestess had given her. It contained a picture.

The picture, drawn on parchment with indelible colors, was a diagram of the scene above the cliff on which we stood. Crude and old and worn from tight folding, the diagram was an unmistakable representation. The skyline of four irregular crags was at the top. Beneath the tallest crag was the wide open cavern.

From where we stood, only a steep bank of rocks and drifted sand separated us from the mouth of that cavern. On the picture that bank was marked with an arrow pointing upward.

The implication was obvious. Looma's footsteps were being directed into that cave. Moreover, the picture instructed her, in the clearest of picture language, to go into that cave and stay there through a night, a day, and a night.

This effect was achieved by two further details of the ingenious drawing. One was the small figure of a woman kneeling within the cave. The other was a series of three suns in the sky—the first one blacked out, the second shining, and the third blacked out.

WE both studied the diagram for several minutes, comparing the

topographical details to those in the scene before us. When we discussed the meaning of the picture we found that each of us had come to the same interpretation. Looma was to enter the cave. She was to spend a night, a day, and a night there. That, then, was the only ritual for which the tribe had sent her here.

"I'll go with you, Looma," I said.

"No."

"But I must. I can't let you go through this alone."

"It is for me alone," Looma answered, folding the parchment and tucking it back into the little painted packet. "All my life I've known that this must be for me alone. It is my pledge."

I must have acted as if I expected to argue the matter, for Looma's hand and eyes went toward her side where the little poison dagger was concealed.

"As you say," I concluded.

"I am ready now," said Looma.

"But it is still an hour till sunset—"

"I am ready now."

We climbed the bank of stones and loose earth. A few trees and bushes dotted the steep surface. The loose sandy soil appeared to have accumulated by successive landslides. Perhaps it was soil that had washed down from the mouth of the cavern—or sifted down from the action of winds.

There were foot tracks—fresh ones—ascending that precipitous grade.

Our eyes lifted toward the mouth of the cavern. We were not yet high enough to see to it. With each step of our progress the entrance grew wider and higher. Now we could distinguish the wedged stones that formed the ceiling. Here and there were long shafts of evening sunlight piercing through the gaps in the cavern roof.

Such smooth, weird shaped stones! They assumed all sorts of grotesque fantastic shapes. They had been shaped

by the action of winds and blowing sands.

But more fantastic than any of the natural formations was that living object which stood squarely in the center of the cavern entrance!

First we saw his ragged hair, his tattered gray whiskers blowing in the breeze.

Ascending a few steps higher, we could see the complete figure of the mad derelict, swaying restlessly, slapping the ground with his rusty old sabre.

NEITHER of us was surprised. I had felt instinctively that this forlorn creature was bent on taking his madness out on us sooner or later. Thirty or forty steps lay between us and him.

"Keep back of me," I said, taking Looma by the hand.

"Wait," Looma whispered. "This way!"

We circled a little to one side, for Looma had noticed a half-dead tree. She pointed to a straight tough limb that was the right size to fit into my hands. It was but the work of a minute to convert the limb into a club. I weighed the finished product in my hands. It felt right.

"Slippity-slappity-slickety-slackety!" the insane old man ripped out in a razor-edged voice. He followed through with an uproarious volley of laughter. His glittering eyes crisscrossed us as we approached him.

"Stay back, Looma," I muttered, "until I clear the path."

The crazy man stopped his laughter and set up another nonsensical rhythm—a grotesque mixture of words and clangs of his sabre against a rock.

"Slippity-slappity (clang!) . . . Slippity-slappity (clang!) . . . slippity-slappity (clang!) . . ."

At the same time he wagged his old

head vociferously and did a hobbling dance.

"Listen, you!" I shouted. "Chase yourself down the bank! You're not wanted here! . . . Get on!"

The old man's words and music took a new turn, still in rhythm to his dance. "Let me kill her. I'm your friend. Let me kill her. I'm your friend. Let me—"

"He's hopeless!" I grumbled to Looma. I had a profane notion that if this cave was supposed to be sacred, he was certainly doing his blessed best to put a curse upon it. I swung my club threateningly. "Get away, damn you!"

"Let the lady tell me . . . Let the lady tell me . . . Let the lady tell me!" the old man squawked.

Looma accepted the challenge. With a depth of tone that was afire with purpose she called, "I am going in. I ask you to get away!"

To my surprise the madman hushed his stream of blabbing, turned toward Looma with a deep lopsided gesture that was meant for a bow. He started down the hill.

On the third or fourth step he stopped and began to chop at a tree root with his sabre. Clang! Clang! Clang! Without looking back at us he struck up a new singsong verse:

"If you *knew*, you'd rather die . . . If you *knew*, you'd rather die . . . If you *knew*, you'd rather die! . . ."

"Wait, Looma—not yet!" I hissed. She was moving cautiously toward the big open cavern. I caught a glimpse of the place and saw nothing to arouse my alarm. It was a single big open room, walled and roofed with the curious sand-worn stones. There was obviously nothing in the place itself to be feared. It was only the nearness of the madman that I feared. "Don't let yourself get trapped in a corner till I've chased this devil into the river—"

Then it happened. And so swiftly it

happened that it had all the earmarks of sudden death.

The strength of a madman is only matched by the quickness of a madman. With a swiftness and a cunning that I would have thought impossible for this limping old demon, he sprang around and flung his sabre—squarely at Looma!

I LEAPED blindly. A blazing stab of pain cut me through the shoulder. I started to tumble down the embankment. I barely caught my balance—with the aid of the extra weight that swung outward from my shoulder—the sabre!

The next instant Looma was tugging at that sabre, jerking it out of the tight muscles that had caught it. She tore it free. The blood gushed down from the gash that had rendered my arm helpless. The madman cut loose with a hideous laugh.

Laughing, he came toward us. I was too slow to snatch the sabre from Looma's hand, for I still had a deadly grip on the club. I swung. His arm flew up to take the blow. It struck hard. It unbalanced him. But with the strength and swiftness of madness he froze onto the weapon.

Down we went together, tumbling pell-mell over rocks and crusty heaps of sand. I tried to kick free of him. He got me by the good arm, sank his nails into my flesh, clung to me as if his fingers were so many steel bolts. Club and sabre were gone and forgotten by the time we rolled out onto the broad level cliff. It was teeth and nails and hair now.

We rolled to a stop. We tore at each other like beasts.

For an instant we were caught in a deadlock so tight that all motion ceased. His teeth closed down on the wrist of my good arm. With that same hand

I pulled hard and steady at his whiskers. I was above him. Blood from my ripped shoulder splashed down on his brown sweat-smeared chest.

Strength against strength—life and death at stake! And yet all motion seemed to have ceased in this instant of deadlock. From beyond the edge of the cliff the mocking melody of the spring sang up to us. From the sandy slope above us came sounds of Looma's footsteps. Was she coming down to help me with the job I couldn't finish?

The strength of my arm, the tug of my fingers at the ugly whiskers brought the old man's head back—back—back over the edge of a rock that my knees had crowded under his neck. I gave a little lunge. My weight crushed down, my right knee crunched his Adam's apple. The demon beneath me choked and gagged. My right wrist slipped free of his teeth. There was scarcely the strength left in my good arm to deliver the punches I struck at his head—

But why should I strike him? The fellow was dead.

Looma was beside me. The faint came over me very slowly. I fought it. I fought as hard to stave off that faint as I had ever fought anything in my life. And for good reason. Looma was clutching me in her arms, she was kissing my face, kissing my lips—

Blackness—blackness—deeper and deeper. Burning pain, mingled with soothing moments—a tightening at my shoulder—no more flow of blood—cool water over my arms, over my face—softness at my lips—blackness, blackness—why did I have to pass out. . . ?

CHAPTER VI

The Cave of Voices

IT seemed days and days. Nights and nights. It was nightmarish. I

tried to wake myself up. I couldn't. I couldn't force my eyes open. I couldn't make my arms move. And all the while I was having such frightful dreams. Sand—sand—sand! It kept sifting over me. It was going to cover me up. I was being buried alive in sifting sand.

But I could still breathe. I was still alive. My arms were burning frightfully. The sand must be blazing, must be blowing out of a fire. Still, there was a coolness at my forehead—a strange coolness! If I could only wake up!

Those voices! Would they ever cease? Whenever the sands blew over me the voices were there—deep fathomless whispers—the talking of the winds—the mysterious voices of the night—the howling cries of blowing sands that brought pain and death. Why, the cave was full of them—and they were all talking in the ancient Traysomian tongue—mystery words of the Traysomian tribe that I could never understand.

Cave? What cave? Where was I? Where was Looma? I wanted to call her. I couldn't. I couldn't bring myself out of these depths of blackness. Sleep was on me. It had me bound. It wouldn't let me go.

Sands . . . Voices . . . Winds that howled and laughed and whispered in mystic Traysomian words . . . Looma . . . Looma . . .

I AWOKE to find that I was lying somewhere under a vast, clear starlit sky. It was the last hour of night. The waning moon was nearing the western horizon. A faint gray of morning streaked the east. A wide panorama of purple mists spread before me—the Lakawog valley. My first thought was, what a glorious, magical land—a land of plenty with nobody living in it. It

could be Looma's and mine!

Looma! Where was she?

In the cave, of course. Gradually everything came back. I was lying high above the sacred spring, far back from the edge of the cliff that overhung it. I could barely hear the teasing laughing voices of the falling waters.

Above me stretched the heaps of sand, dotted by rocks and trees and foottracks, barely visible in the early morning twilight. And farther above, the sacred cave—

A gentle wind was blowing through that cave. I could hear its weird song, its mystic whispers. I could see little lines of bright sand sift down the hillside. The tracks which we had made had sifted full. And now, as my dreams came back on me sharply, I discovered that sand had drifted close around me, half covering my legs, nearly burying the provision bags that Looma had evidently tucked around me.

I tried to rise up. In spite of the torturing pains through my shoulder and arms, my muscles responded to my will. I came up on my hands and knees. The tightness in my shoulder told me that the healing processes were at work. And I knew at once that I had Looma to thank for that. She had bound me with cloth bandages, and though the material was crude rough cloth, the skill of her efforts had been effective.

Leaves dropped from my forehead as I struggled to my feet—leaves that had helped to cool my fever during the recent nights.

How many nights had passed? Perhaps not more than two; certainly no less. The crusted healing surfaces of my wounds proved that.

I cast my eyes about for signs of the body whose life I had choked out. By the growing light of dawn I beheld the mound of stones a few yards be-

yond me. Looma had taken care of that, too.

Already the madman's grave, swept over by sand, had begun to blend in with the hillside scenery as a thing forgotten. Only the old rusty sabre, standing sentinel-like near the mound, brought back the vision of that haunting terror that had come so near to claiming Looma's life.

"Looma!" I called in a croaking voice. I staggered weakly up the hillside toward the mouth of the cave. "Looma! Looma!"

SHE was there. She was breathing slowly, deeply. I thought she must be asleep, so slowly and evenly was she breathing. But she was not lying down. She was on her knees. Her back was toward me. The darkness of the cave was upon her. Such light as there was gave a faint glow to the handle of her dagger, and to her bare arms.

"Looma!" my voice lowered to an intense whisper. Something in her attitude warned me—frightened me—bid me stay back. She was in a sacred ecstacy that must not be interrupted.

"Looma!" I breathed, but the weird whispers of the winds through the cave took my breath away. There was something paralyzing about those wisps of voices. They were so unmistakably accented like words of the Traysomian tongue. They were the voices of nature whose mysteries were too deep for any creature of civilization to fathom.

Slowly, ceaselessly, Looma's shoulders rose and fell with the ever-so-slight movement of her breathing. At the cavern entrance I waited, watching. I was within thirty feet of her. I knew that I must go no closer. I must wait until the light of dawn melted away the shadows that engulfed her. Then her mysterious sacred rites would be done. She would come to me at last, freed of

the chains that had bound her from me.

At last her arms drew upward, her shadowy form rose weakly. She was about to turn.

"Looma!" I called eagerly. "I'm waiting for you—"

"Please go back!" Her voice was low and heavy, and her words were spoken slowly as if she were weighed down with some great sorrow.

"But, Looma—" I gasped. I was somehow choked with nameless fears. Why didn't she turn and come to me? Instead, she was motioning with a slight wave of her fingers for me to go back.

I obeyed. Several feet from the entrance of the cave I waited.

I saw her come forth into the morning twilight. I saw, and every drop of blood in my body went cold. *Looma was a feeble, white-haired old woman.**

* One of the most venerable, and most superstitiously regarded legends of the South Sea Islands is the legend of the wise old women who rule the destinies of the tribe. For whole generations they live on, unchanging, ever-old, never aging further. And from their lips come the wise words that guide the tribe in every important decision.

Scientifically, there is no explanation of these weird old women, but native stories hint of uncanny things. It is not impossible that radioactive emanations, perhaps from some deep-buried deposit of pitchblende, filled the cave where Looma knelt, and acting upon the tissues of her body, so changed them that she became, physically, an old woman in a few days. And yet, in spite of the outer effect, she remained unimpaired mentally, and was still physically strong, and able to live out her life, to the benefit of the tribe.

Obviously, by so changing her body, her sole remaining position in life would be mental, the pursuit of thought, wisdom, and advice. No longer, due to the radiations, would her normal function of life, motherhood, womanliness, be possible. Scientifically, there is a great logic contained here, and who can say that primitive peoples have not discovered the simple truths of psychology that modern psychologists know?

What happened to the beautiful Looma may appear fantastic, but basically, its reality may stagger modern science, when its phenomenon is more fully studied by interested scientists. Perhaps, in future times, civilization may utilize basically the same principles to cause human beings to adapt themselves to specialized tasks for the betterment of the race.—Ed.

She did not turn to look at me. She made her way cautiously down the bank of loose sand, aiding herself by catching hold of trees and projecting stones.

Nor did she stop when she reached the broad level top of the cliff above the spring. She plodded on, slowly and carefully, down the precipitous rocky trail over which we had ascended together only two evenings before.

I followed.

At the mirror-surfaced pool a few yards below the spring I caught up with her.

"Looma!" I cried.

She was kneeling at the edge of the pool. The white light of dawn was on her face. She was looking into the mirror of waters. She saw the waves of white hair that fell over her shoulders, she saw the aged wrinkled face—a face that was kindly and mellow with the wisdom of old age. And she gave no expression of surprise at what she saw.

AT last her dark beautiful old eyes lifted to meet mine.

"Trodo," she spoke, and the very earth seemed to tremble beneath me, "what has happened can never be changed. What *is* is as it should be. I would not have it otherwise . . . except for you."

"You *knew*—" I choked.

"I did not know," she answered slowly. "I only guessed. But now—" she looked intently at her reflection in the water—"the veils of mystery are gone. I know what lies before me. The winds of wisdom have swept over me. I have been endowed, Trodo, with the timeless truths that dwell within the island of Traysomia. They are mine to give back to my people."

She arose and stood, a venerable figure. Her watery old eyes were bright with the mystic light of knowledge, her

thin fingers clutched the little blue leather packet that hung from her withered neck.

"I am to be the wise old woman of the tribe, Trodo. Now that I am what I am, there is nothing in the world that I could ask except a few years of life to serve my people."

"Looma!" I cried and I was startled by the note of horror that my voice betrayed. "If I hadn't let you go in that cave, Looma—"

Even as I spoke my hand brushed against the object that weighed in my pocket. Dazedly I brought it forth—the stone doll. In my trembling hand it rested—the *warning* that the madman had thrown us. Obviously the features of that doll were meant to represent an old woman; the white thistle fibers were the white hair of old age.

"He tried to tell us, Looma!" I gasped. "He tried to tell us—and I killed him! *Looma, if I had known—*"

"Vling-gaff, Trodof!"

That was all. Just vling-gaff. But the depth of compassion in Looma's voice as she uttered her last words to me told me the volumes that would always be left unsaid. . . .

I followed after her for part of a day's journey, but whenever she looked back to see me coming she waved for me to stay. There was a gentleness in the wave of her hand that I found compelling. She seemed to be saying, All wisdom is mine . . . I know best . . . You must not come . . . Though I am aged my step is sure . . . I will get back . . . Your part is done . . .

At last I grew faint and dropped by the way. After sleep and food I slowly wended my way back toward the center of the island. I drank at the spring. I made my way up to the top of the cliff that overhung it. Above me, where the land sloped upward toward the

(Concluded on page 139)



...ACCORDING TO YOU

Letters intended for publication should be addressed to According To You, c/o P.O. Box 73, Brooklyn, N.Y., 11232

Dear Mr. White:

Re Robert Levin's comments in the October issue of *FANTASTIC* on a story of mine called "How Now Purple Cow": Mr. Levine states, in part, "... I find that the writer of such an article [sic] must be suffering from mental deficiency." He is being most unfair—and only partly accurate.

All the medical authorities here agree that what I am actually suffering from is *furor scribendi*, an incurable, bittersweet malady which strikes the minds of certain men and women across the globe each and every year. I cannot help, and certainly cannot be expected to apologize for, being thus afflicted.

Bill Pronzini
Writers' Relief Sanatorium
Intensive Care Unit 2, Ward C
San Francisco, California

Ted White—

Ah, vicious, vicious Lupoff! I am not a merrilophile, but either am I a merrilphobe. Nonetheless . . .

"Man Swings SF" has got to be one of the funniest of stories ever published. Excruciating prose; ahh, I could scream. Hilarious commentary. Since it had two targets it was twice as funny—more than twice—as Sladek's Ballard satire in *F&SF* some time back. Much funnier.

Years from now, people will wonder what it's about. But today . . .

Can even "Hasan" top it for sheer genius? (Speaking of which, please say you didn't cut it, please, in print. Silence will be an admission that less than the 87,000 words are appearing in *FANTASTIC*, in which case I will wait for the book and write you a dirty letter.)

Jeffrey D. Smith
7205 Barlow Court
Baltimore, Md., 21207

As I said in my editorial last issue (but which you hadn't seen yet when you

wrote), it is not our policy to make cuts in our serials. "Hasan" appears here absolutely uncut, at its full, 87,000-word length, exactly as written by Piers Anthony. And don't hold your breath waiting for the book—unless the novel's appearance here joggles a publisher into considering it. —TW

Dear Editor,

Here are some of my opinions and views on FANTASTIC:

1. Curtail the soap-box editorials. The October editorial did not belong in an entertainment magazine. When I want to read that type of opinionizing I can seek elsewhere. (And when I find I cannot write the editorials I choose to write here, I will go elsewhere. Sorry, fella, but an editor has some prerogatives, and that is one of them. —TW)

2. Stick with one or two fairly long, good, new stories in each issue (if you're unable to purchase more). Don't throw in a gaggle of two-or-three page short experimental new stories as in the February and April issues. (At present, even with our new policy we find ourselves publishing few stories per issue, largely because our recent serials have been very long, averaging more than 40,000 words an instalment in each issue. But I buy stories for their quality, not their length, and try to balance them out in each issue. —TW)

3. Keep your reprints vintage and varied. I'd like to see at least one or two heroic or weird/supernatural fantasy reprints in each issue. (As you now know, we are running only one Fantasy Classic an issue. We are limited in our choice by the material originally published in FANTASTIC and its forerunner, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. But we'll try to keep our classic both vintage and

varied. —TW)

4. Do try and get some sword and sorcery material. Brak and the Grey Mouser started me reading FANTASTIC in the first place. (Good S&S, as I've said before, is hard to come by. —TW)

5. Perhaps most important, improve the physical appearance of the magazine. Those recent covers have been atrocious. If you can't get new cover paintings, why not reprint old FANTASTIC ADVENTURES covers? They'd be a great improvement over what you are using now. (Not most of them . . . I've checked! —TW)

6. Good luck. I want to see FANTASTIC flourish again.

Richard Landwehr
San Luis Rey, California

Dear Mr. White:

Congratulations on your editorial in the October FANTASTIC. If you ever run for office, you have my support, such as it is.

In the same vein, have you ever speculated on the possibility of an eventual alliance between the two great forces of repression in today's world? Before you dismiss the idea, contemplate the essential similarity between Communism and Christianity, and the ever-growing trend in recent years among American clergy toward secularism. I am not one who sees a commie lurking behind every bush; this seems a logical enough result of American Christianity's shift in emphasis to the better life here on earth, coupled with the obvious decline in the numbers of the faithful. What a dismal prospect: a new Holy Amalgam, cornerstoned by the inevitable Book (titled perhaps Christian Manifesto?), rationalized by the usual quota of scholars and intellectuals, and typified by an era of repression which could combine

the most salient features of the police state and the Dark Ages. A new priesthood, composed of bureaucrats ruling by Divine Right, and a State which is God's instrument on earth. The Church could rise anew, albeit in a somewhat different form. Or would it be so different?

In a more cheerful light, congratulations also on the rebirth of FANTASTIC and her sister magazine. The October issue read more like an outstanding anthology than a periodical. You have this reader's "loyal support." I suspect you also have a great many more letters this month. (True. —TW)

Stan Spring
423 Parkington Drive
Muscatine, Iowa, 52761

I'm afraid I don't consider your nightmare prospect of an alliance between Christianity and Communism at all likely, particularly in the form you describe. Historically, Protestant Christianity in this country has always moved with the times, making frugality and hard work a virtue in pioneer times, but accenting a more comfortable life when that became the norm. The present move towards secularism has been made away from the more repressive aspects of the Church (Protestantism has never been as rigid nor as repressive as Roman Catholicism), and has been made by the more youthful and liberal members of the clergy. To my mind their work exemplifies the original concept of Christianity and has restored a genuine conscience to the church. To equate this move with a drift towards an accommodation with Communism strikes me as absurd. In any event, on each side there remains a vast body of dogma to be overcome, and a long history of hostility. We also have a Constitution that would

have to be set aside before we could have a Church-State here. —TW

Dear Mr. White:

I'm happy to see that you are trying to revive FANTASTIC—the magazine has certainly gone through some rough years.

The return of the editorial column is a definite improvement. It's nice to know that someone is interested in advancing the fantasy field rather than just making a buck.

In the way of suggestions for the future, I'd like to see a brief author profile in each issue and, if you can find the material, a story by a new author each issue, something like in *IF*.

In the way of old authors, I'd like to see more of Bradbury and Bloch—and less of Bunch.

Lee Smith
2340 Cedar Rd.
York, Pa., 17404

Well, you'll note we have both Bloch and Bunch this issue. Can you accept the compromise? —TW

Dear Mr. White:

I fear for AMAZING and FANTASTIC . . . Each issue under your editorship has become increasingly oriented toward fandom at the expense of the fiction which generates it. The Oct. 1969 issue has 146 pages, only 45 of which are devoted to new fiction. The rest, quite frankly, is trash: outdated fiction and boring features topped off with six pages of wide-eyed, adolescent gurgling by Terry Carr.

With so many fanzines around, why turn AMAZING and FANTASTIC into super-fanzines? We fen can read about fen doings in fanzines. We buy your magazines for fiction—*new* fiction—and 45 pages at a cost of 50¢ is over a penny a

page. That's expensive!

James Arno

660 High Mountain Rd.

Franklin Lakes, N.J., 07417

Well, James, I just paged through a copy of the last issue of FANTASTIC before I became editor, and I found exactly 39 pages of new stories. But not only did I give you more pages, I gave you more wordage, since we have decreased the size of our type and now have more words-per-page. When I began working on these magazines, it was not my desire to make "super-fanzines" of them, but it was my ambition to make first-rate magazines out of them. The addition of the Fantasy Fandom column, as well as the other features, was made at no expense to the new stories, and in my opinion helped round out the magazine. Now that we've shelved the reprint policy, I'm sure you've found the ratio of pages of new fiction per penny spent has changed greatly to your advantage. —TW

Dear Ted:

The October FANTASTIC doth protest too much, I fear. Much as you may wish to join the Great Cultural Revolution, it has already passed you by in favor of *NEW WORLDS*, Essex House and *Again, Dangerous Visions*. (It's going to come as a shock to you, John, but the thought of joining "the Great Cultural Revolution," as you put it, never crossed my mind. Those who know me, know I've never joined a fad for the sake of the fad in my life. And FANTASTIC certainly has not hitched its wagon to any falling stars lately. Try again. —TW)

Still, it is amusing to witness Terry Carr awestruck at the daring shown by some fen of "14 or 15" who are "putting down reactionaries like Lester del Rey and John J. Pierce and Sam Moskowitz"

and even using "filler quotes from Dick Gregory and Bob Dylan and Archibald MacLeish." I can hardly wait to see Terry's next essay, wherein he discovers Motherhood, or puts down more reactionaries—like, say, Donald A. Wollheim.

Not that I mind. You're welcome to put down all the reactionaries you want—though, I confess, I feel somewhat like a chameleon for liking both Roger Zelazny and del Rey. Maybe I'm a radical-reactionary. Or maybe Terry's labels are too "linear" to be applicable to the S.F. scene.

As one of the under-30 group (I'll join the over-30's on Nov. 3, 1971) you'll have to excuse me for not identifying myself with all the hang-ups you attribute to those "like me, over thirty." Speak for yourself, Ted!

Yours for the Second Foundation

John J. Pierce, liaison officer

257 McMane Ave.

Berkeley Heights, N.J., 07922

I wonder if you can accept the idea that I too like both del Rey and Zelazny? —TW

Dear Mr. White:

After reading your editorial in FANTASTIC of October, 1969, it took me about five minutes to get my breath back, and about one minute more to locate pen and paper to do what I can to lessen your lack of "letters-to-the-editor." My lack of breath was due to the first case of unmitigated joy I've felt in months, and based on the thought, "Good Lord, a man with a real understanding of what's going on around him, the reasons behind it, and of his own reactions to it!" Too much to ask, let alone be prepared for.

And so . . . let me just say "thank you" for many, many reasons, and here's one reader who's behind you all the way

in all your aims.

James W. Clark
143 W. 73rd St.
New York, N.Y.

Dear Mr. White,

I must say that after buying an occasional FANTASTIC or AMAZING for the past couple of years (and buying every issue of *IF*, *GALAXY*, *F&SF* and *ANALOG*) I have noticed a change in "atmosphere" in these two mags which for the most part I avoided but now find myself buying every issue. In this day and age (excuse the cliché) of deintellectualization I detect a growing sense of intelligence and thought in a SF mag (an editor who likes Rock, unbelievable!).

In the past few months I find that I am enjoying your editorials far better than any others. One editor's in particular turn my stomach. (Guess Who.)

I would prefer a mag with some New Wave, some Sword and Sorcery and some of what I call Hard Core SF, etc., with possibly an occasional issue specializing in an author or type of story.

Michael Grenadier
6 Prospect Rd.

Westport, Conn., 06880

That's pretty much the mix we're aiming for, although not with any specific balance in mind. Thing is, I can only buy the best of the stories I receive—and if everyone submits only one type of story, I'm stuck with that type even if I buy the best. But we don't plan to specialize on single authors or story-types in particular issues; past experience indicates that these 'theme' issues sell poorly. The principle seems to be: You can't satisfy all your readers all the time, but if you narrow your focus you satisfy even less of them —TW

Sir,

In reference to your editorial concerning the Smothers Brothers case, I refer you to the article "The Property Status of Airwaves" in the book, *Capitalism: The Unknown Ideal*, by Ayn Rand.

This article gets to most of the basics of the property rights in the case, and to the longer run consequences for freedom to produce and to watch.

Charles Howard Hartman
2112 ½ Fifth Ave North
Great Falls, Montana, 59401

Dear Mr. White,

I've only been a fan for about a year, but until recently the fanzines I read were far and away better than the prozines. Most of the profiction was better than any of the fan fiction, but the really good stories generally got anthologized before long, and I found it more rewarding to read an intelligent fanzine than to read one of the prozines.

Now it's changing, and I'm glad. Since you've taken over AMAZING and FANTASTIC they've greatly improved. The editorials are intelligent, interesting and substantial. And I applaud the fannish features! Not to mention (O delight) the return in both mags of the lettercol. They're almost like fanzines with professional fiction in them—wow!

Dick Lupoff's "Man Swings SF" was horribly, horribly true—and so very funny. I like since that implies a sort of blind acceptance of *all* so-called New Wave stories regardless of quality. And there is some very bad New Wave stuff out—as well as some good, innovative stuff. *England Swings SF* had some of the very worst of it. There may have been some good ones in it, but they don't spring to mind.

Ah, your editorial. You make much the same point, but at greater length, that Harlan Ellison made in one of his columns in the *L.A. Free Press*. He summed it up by saying: ". . . if I—or any other viewer—did not dig the brand of pap being proffered by, say, 'The Good Guys' or 'Green Acres' or 'Mayberry RFD', we expressed our displeasure by turning that special knob. But WE never mounted campaigns of outraged indignation to have those shows cancelled. We were perfectly happy to let everyone watch or not watch as they chose."

Right. I just don't understand why people can't let people alone. There are tv shows that make me honestly ill—they offend me. But I don't get uptight because others watch them—though I do wonder that they have the stomach for them. To each his own. What is it behind this censorship and the condemnation of the younger generation by the older? Jealousy? ("If I couldn't have it, you're darn sure not gonna get it!") It sounds likely. Fear of change? That sounds likely, too. I think it is probably a combination of the two. Older people (and please note: this is a generalization, and so is not wholly true; I know some groovy over-thirties—Harlan is 35!—and some impossible teenagers) see the younger people getting all kinds of things that they merely had frustrated longings for when young. They're jealous, then ashamed of their jealousy, so they cover it up by pretending (maybe they believe it) that these things are *wrong*. Sex is dirty, so is dissent, and kids must remember: Hands Off! Working with the jealousy is the fear of change—the older people (and more conservative young ones) have their nice, safe, familiar world and help! somebody is rocking the boat! Things are

changing fast, too fast, and they try to hang on to their old life by forbidding change.

It won't work. At least, I hope it won't. I (like Terry Carr) am excited by the things that are happening. It promises a lot for the future if only we can keep from killing ourselves with overpopulation or air/water pollution within the next 30 years. If my generation doesn't get killed off by one of the aforementioned disasters, or some other, then maybe we'll be on our way to an exciting, free new world.

Your lettercol wasn't much this time, but I'm sure it will improve—there's so much to write in about now! The best letter was (of course!) the one from those dear, sweet ladies(?). And I hope Robert Levine is a hoax. (*If he is, he hasn't let us in on it yet.* —TW) And won't you print full addresses from now on? Please? At least when you get them.

Happiness,
Lisa Tuttle

6 Pine Forest Circle
Houston, Texas, 77027

Have you ever talked to a member of the generation that reached maturity in the mid-1930's, full of wide-eyed idealism gone sour? I have; and seen copies of The Reader's Digest on their coffee-tables and listened to them tell me cynically about the way their idealism was crushed by the realities they encountered. I'm fond of that maxim Hugo Gernsback used to repeat from time to time on the back cover of another magazine: "The more things change, the more they remain the same." If this new generation can survive ten years of adulthood with its ideals intact and the courage to put them into effect, we shall indeed see a new and better day. But they won't be the first to try, and the weight of history is against

their success. Someday they, too, will be "older people," and the favorite occupation of "older people" is to deplore the "younger generation." In turn, some of the "younger generation" have been known to provide excellent provocation for the dislike they engender. In the meantime, I stand to one side, cynically observing it all, trying to keep my own wits about me, and rarely certain that I'm succeeding. —TW

Dear Ted:

The difference of opinion between Terry Carr and yourself in the October issue of FANTASTIC seems to be due mostly to a difference in viewpoint; sadly but most probably, though, your conclusions are the more accurate. The Baycon Terry Carr attended may have survived the attendant had vibrations, but Berkeley may not, and they are still spreading. SF fans, television viewers, street people, narcos, and revolutionaries, we're all caught in a down-swing that is either real or a mass hallucination and does it make a difference?). One consolation in all this, though, may be the re-emergence of a comparatively large SF readership. Without drawing parallels between the Depression, the War, the different depressions of the silent '50s and our contemporary melancholia, I feel there's some force slowly acting. (For one thing "Star Trek," "Outer Limits," and all the rest, including the best of them and the only fantasy show in the lot, "The Prisoner"—must be having *some* effect.) I can't help seeing the return of a viable (and huyahle) AMAZING and FANTASTIC as part of a larger phenomenon that includes, for instance, the peculiar hybrid of fanzine, prozine and mainly peripheral rockzine that *Crawdaddy!* seems to be becoming.

Fantasy is the sub-division of the SF field where there is the most room for growth and FANTASTIC is certainly a magazine that needs some growing. The letters column is a must; fill it if you have to write your own. The editorials, as Campbell has proven, can be the lifeblood of an otherwise uninspiring magazine; push them as hard as you think you can and remain honest. Good book reviews, even essays, are, from another point of view, the greater need; with the exception of Algis Budrys—who is not given enough room—there isn't any one doing a worthwhile book review column these days and there hasn't been since Damon Knight. I have reservations about making it a policy to run articles strictly on fandom but they can be interesting, even to an outsider, and I much prefer reading even the most boring of their ilk to plodding through the kind of fictional oldies dredged up for reprint in the October issue. The stories are supposed to be what an SF magazine is all about; even when they're trash it's vastly preferable that they be living, current trash rather than exhumations heavy with medieval claustrophobia, capable of taking a few rusty steps today only because they were mechanical to begin with. The reprints have to go. (*They have gone.* —TW)

Of the new stories in this issue your novelet was far and away the best, marred mainly by the abruptness with which Robin's ring and its importance were brought on stage and the fact that it was overshadowed by *Jewels of Elsewhen*. The others were more uneven but possessing good points (as well as some had ones they had in common with the reprints: an almost total lack of emotional content, character or situational development—the concept I

use now that plots have gone out of style.) Only the Verge Foray story gave me that hungry -five -seconds -later -and -boy -why did -I -waste -my -time -reading -that?-feeling.

This is becoming a marathon letter.

I go back to the beginning:

The Renaissance, if there is any

potentiality for it at all, must not be allowed to bog down in a quagmire of derivative sword-and-sorcery, space-opera, nostalgia, Star-Trek trivia and pretentious New-Thing hype. Be advised.

Edward Brenner

18 West 22nd St.

Huntington Station, L.I.H.

SECRET OF THE STONE DOLL

(Concluded from page 131)

mouth of the cave, the winds had quieted. Loose sand no longer sifted down.

I picked up the old rusty sabre that projected sentinel-like from the ground. I ambled back down the rocky trail, paused to look at my own reflection in the crystal pool. My face had become a little older, more weather-beaten,

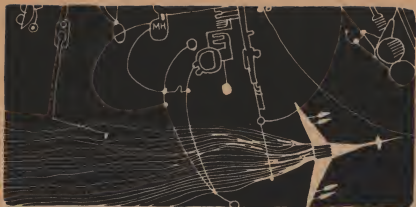
somewhat ragged with neglected beard.

As I moved on, going nowhere in particular, a hazy thought slipped through my mind. When, in some distant year, another Traysomian bride should be brought to the cave by her young husband to fulfill her tribal appointment, I would doubtless be the madman who waited in their path.

Next issue in FANTASTIC:

As I've been saying, good Sword & Sorcery stories are hard to get. But we've got one of the best—Fritz Leiber's *THE SNOW WOMEN*, his newest novella of Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser. It's 30,000 words and complete in our next issue!

Rounding the issue out: *DEAR AUNT ANNIE* by Gordon Eklund (his first published story—and a blockbuster it is, too!), *THE FREEDOM FIGHTER* by Ray Russell, and *THE WAGER LOST BY WINNING*, a "Traveller in Black" novelette by John Brunner. Plus of course our usual features.



FANTASY BOOKS

TOLKIEN: A LOOK BEHIND "THE LORD OF THE RINGS," by Lin Carter, Ballantine Books, 1969, 95 cents; **UNDERSTANDING TOLKIEN,** by William Ready, Paperback Library, 1969, 75 cents.

reviewed by
Fritz Leiber

The most fascinating fantasy phenomenon of our times is the fantastic popularity of the Ring trilogy by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, an Oxford don with an ability to depict landscapes, a resourcefulness in analyzing the relationships of loyal male adventurers, and a capacity greater than, say, Dunsany's for remaining serious about a fantasy world.

Lin Carter does a great job of presenting Tolkien's literary forebears, from Homer to William Morris. He makes no false distinctions between the epic and the metrical romance. He tells about the many Classic epics, now mostly lost, besides the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Medieval legends and romances, the Italians such as Ariosto who helped

inspire the great master of English poetry, Edmund Spenser, and moderns like Eddison.

Carter shows particularly good judgment in nailing down Tolkien's chief sources as the Elder Edda of the Norse, Wagner's "Ring of the Nibelungs," and Irish folklore. He investigates—just enough—the sources of the names in Tolkien. His book is fun to read.

The same can't be said about *Understanding Tolkien*. One wonders who is this "distinguished scholar who spent hours interviewing Tolkien"—an hour and thirty-one minutes, I'd judge. One gets the image of a somber hippy, twenty-nine years old, and used to laying down the law to his disciples. "Silly" and "wretched" are his favorite words, which he applies to Tolkien too, while pretending to glorify him—and meanwhile losing no opportunity to tell us over and over that C. S. Lewis of the *Malacandra* trilogy and Charles Williams of *War in Heaven* and *The Greater Trumps*—both Tolkien's cronies at Oxford—are lousy writers.

There is this much truth to what he says: Lewis and Williams let it creep through their fiction that they were trying to convert the reader to Christianity; Tolkien took it easier.

From nowhere in particular—except his own analysis of man and the cosmos—Ready comes up with the interpretation that Hohbits are hippies, and that the villains of the trilogy—Sauron, Saruman, etc.—are Big Business and the machine. It would be just as logical—and far more likely—to identify them with Nazi Germany, Tolkien having written his three big novels mostly during the second world war.

I don't know myself why Tolkien is so popular. I'd guess it's because he winningly presents high-minded, self-sacrificing heroes to a generation weaned on cynicism, protest, and sex.

Not that Ready doesn't have some good insights, as on the spirit-tormenting influence of the English public school, and on the similarities of Tolkien and T. H. White, author of the Arthurian four-book series *The Once and Future King*. Which reminds me that there's a great book about Arthur out—*The Quest For Arthur's Britain*, by Geoffrey Ashe and other hands, Frederick A. Praeger, 1968, \$12.50. Really worth the price are the first and last chapters, which tell, among other things, about how the Arthurian legend was used as political propaganda by the Normans (Did you know they came in 1066 to liberate Arthurian Britain from its Anglo-Saxon tyrants?), by the Tudors (Henry VIII had from his crafty father a Round Table he used to show off to visitors and he named his first son Arthur, but the kid died), and even by Victoria (whose beloved consort Alfred was identified with Arthur by Tennyson

in his *Idylls of the King*).

Fine recent biography of Terence Hanbury White, by the way (Viking, 1967) by Sylvia Townsend Warner, author of the highly imaginative short stories of the *Cat's Cradle Book*. It takes a fantasy writer to tell with sympathy the life of a fantasy writer. White's *The Sword in the Stone* is the *Huckleberry Finn* (Can there be greater praise?) of the Arthurian legend.

—Fritz Leiber

THE NEAR EAST: 10,000 YEARS OF
Mifflin, Boston, 1968, \$4.50.

reviewed by
Fritz Leiber

This is the fifth of the wide-scope histories by science fiction's Good Doctor and Renaissance Man—van Vogt's nexiologist from *The Voyage of the Space Beagle*, husily linking up all fields of knowledge. Earlier came *The Greeks*, *The Roman Republic*, *The Roman Empire*, and the popular *The Egyptians*. One often finds them in the children's sections of libraries. Very good!—but there should always be copies in the adult section as well.

Asimov has got hold of the simple but powerful idea of tracing a land's history from the earliest anthropological and archeological records down to the present day, not slighting any time period in between, with a balanced attention paid social organization, politics, war, technological developments, cultural achievements, and outstanding personalities. Beneath his simplicity and clarity of style are depth, scope, and original concepts.

This book covers the lands between Egypt, Greece, the savage north, India, and the Afric south, the lands around and especially those located in the Fertile

Crescent of Mesopotamia and the Levant. It begins in 8000 B.C. with the lowest levels of the town of Jarmo and ends with the Six-Day War. It gives as much space to the Turks, Parthians, Seleucids, Arabs, and Sassanid Persians of the Third to Fifth Centuries A.D. as it does to the Sumerians, Assyrians, and the earlier Persians who battled the Greek city-states and were conquered by Alexander the Great.

These peoples and this area of the world have always been a rich source for the fantasy writer. One need only mention *The Arabian Nights*, the Assassins (prototype of that possibly best form of military organization, recently popularized by Ian Fleming, where the leaders rather than the masses are the targets), Harun al-Rashid and Jafar, the blitzkriegering Mongols under Genghis Khan and Kublai Khan (who decreed the pleasure dome in Coleridge's poem), Bagdad, Babylon (remember Dunsany's Barbul-el-Sharnak?), and the legend of Gilgamesh, which contributed to the Bible and the *Odyssey*.

One discovers here where Robert E. Howard got some of his most effective names for his tales of Conan the Cimmerian. Nabonidus, the sinister Red Priest of Corinthia in "Rogues in the House" was the scholarly last king of the Chaldeans. King Yezdigird of Turan is only two disputable vowels away from the Yazdegirds who kinged it over the Sassanid Persians. While the nomadic Kushan tribes who sniped at the Sassanids from the area to become Afghanistan, suggests Howard's southern lands of Kush and Keshan. And of course the historic Cimmerians were barbarians living north of the Black Sea, but driven south by the Scythians to raid the Fertile Crescent and war with Assyria in the

Eighth Century B.C.

There are many links between *The Near East* and Asimov's numerous Bible books, but they are not over-emphasized.

There are some excellent drawings of historical parallels, which might have helped and still might help fringe-paranoid, greedy, ultra-patriotic mankind find more peaceful routes into the future. The insanely stubborn, unending, pointless war between the Zoroastrian Sassanids and the Christian Eastern Roman Empire, which left them both exhausted prey for the Moslem Arabs, resembles quite closely the growing conflict between the American-and-Russian-dominated halves of the world—with a possibility of the "Red Confucians" picking up the pieces.

Finally, there are twelve full-page maps of the area of the book, which help nail down its story.

—Fritz Leiber

THE DEMONS OF THE UPPER AIR, by Fritz Leiber, a booklet of Fritz Leiber's poems (limited to 300 copies, each numbered and signed by the author), \$3.50, available from R. A. Squires, 1745 W. Kenneth Road, Glendale, California, 91201.

Leiber's poetry, which shows up his occasional careless choices of word and is hardly to be compared with his prose, nevertheless presents the spirit of the Space Age with a dark excitingness. Leiber tells me he wrote these eight poems, beautifully hand-set by Squires, back in the 1930's, but has since polished them.

Recommended chiefly to Leiber fans to give to Leiber fans.

—Alexander Temple

(continued from page 5)

magazine like this is put together, to historical run-downs in the linked careers of FANTASTIC and FANTASTIC ADVENTURERS. And I shall, sooner or later, try to answer all such requests in my editorials.

What I'd like right now to do, however, is to ask you a question. And that is, how well do you like this magazine's present title? Since Ziff-Davis launched FANTASTIC in 1952, I have been of the personal opinion that the title was too cold, too abrupt—that it was never really properly evocative of the kind of stories it published. Now more than ever I feel this way. To me the bald word, "Fantastic," suggests short, gimmicky unlikely stories. It gives me none of the warmth of breadth of imagination encompassed in, for example, "Emphyrio," or "Hasan," It seems a narrow word.

Recently I discussed this with our publisher, Sol Cohen. I suggested that we add the word "Adventures"—and restore the title to that of the magazine's precursor, FANTASTIC ADVENTURES. Because to me that word, "Adventures," opens up the wide horizons implicit in the stories we are now featuring.

We discussed various alternatives. For instance, our spine identifies us as FANTASTIC STORIES, although "Stories" has never been an official part of the magazine's title. Then, there's "Tales," "Stories of Imagination," etc. But I held out for "Adventures."

The objection to resuming this old title would be a connotation of a return to (supposedly inferior) pulp-magazine standards—or a possible confusion about the nature of the material in the magazine. Possibly some of you might

think a magazine labelled FANTASTIC ADVENTURES was wholly a reprint of material from the original FA.

We came to no firm decision, but I remain dissatisfied with our present title.

How about you? What do you think? Would you like to see a title change? And if so, of what sort? Would you like to see the magazine become FANTASTIC ADVENTURES, or would you spurn it? Bear in mind, I'm talking solely about a change in title—not of editorial policy.

I'd like to hear from you about this; we'll probably do as the bulk of you suggests.

One recently received letter took me to task for not publishing any *fantasy* in our October issue, in clear contravention of our title, while another reader reminded me that "science fiction" is part of our subhead and asked me when we expected to publish some again.

Well, clearly AMAZING and FANTASTIC are separate magazines, and it has been my policy to maintain that separation by establishing differing criteria for each. AMAZING is basically a "science fiction" magazine, while FANTASTIC is basically a "fantasy" magazine. Stories will overlap, but that's the theory behind the way I am editing the two magazines. But this whole question of "science fiction" versus "fantasy" leads me to the dangerously broad topic, "What is 'fantasy,' anyhow?"

In its broadest definition, "fantasy" is imaginative fiction. It is every sort of fiction which is not firmly, mundanely anchored to the immediate present and immediate past. In this sense, "fantasy" includes "science fiction" as a sub-type, the "scientific fantasy" (as sf was once passingly known).

Today, however, we usually speak of science fiction and fantasy as two similar, but mutually exclusive types of fiction, and "fantasy" becomes another genre, ranked alongside sf, mysteries, westerns, etc. In this definition, we usually speak of sf being *plausible* according to present knowledge, while fantasy embodies an element of the *impossible* (like magic) which we accept for the basis of the story. Even here, the dividing line is blurry, since time-travel is commonly considered a part of the epiphenomena of science fiction, while most scientists regard it as impossible. (Well, there is some speculation that the "tachyon", a hypothetical FTL particle, would go backwards in time, and there's also some cause to believe that "anti-matter", which is a laboratory possibility in extremely minute amounts for extremely short periods of time, might also have a retrograde movement in time—but both are a long way removed from the glistening machine which deposits you in the past just in time to kill your inoffensive grandfather for the sake of a paradox . . .)

And there are sub-classes of even this definition of "fantasy." There are the fairy-tales of our youth, from Grimm to Baum, and not forgetting *Alice*. There is the entire heroic-fantasy genre, annexed most recently by the Sword & Sorcery crowd, but having a long and honorable history dating to before the time of King Arthur. There is that branch of fantasy which deals with the occult—Ray Plamer once published a short-lived magazine called *MYSTIC* which published only occult fantasies. And there is of course the whole "horror" field, embodying Lovecraft and *WEIRD TALES* et al. In addition, there is surreal fantasy—very little of it in print, but Cocteau's movies

are fine examples; and there is mythic fantasy—the fantasy of the pagan gods of many pantheons which Roger Zelazny has so successfully mined in recent years; and no doubt other sub-sub-classifications which would occur to me if I stopped now and wracked my brains for five more minutes. In addition, there are the types of fantasy which spring up as schools around a particular magazine. The two most obvious were the *WEIRD TALES* school, already noted, and that of John Campbell's *UNKNOWN*.

As with all classifications, these are generalities and will break down quite readily when one starts hauling out specific examples for that purpose. Most are after-the-fact definitions, based upon specific successes in a given area which have led to imitations and schools of followers. A good fantasy writer pays no attention to these classifications, but writes his stories as he sees fit. They may or may not turn out to be easily cubbyholed, and if they aren't it is as often the mark of a superior story as it is cause for criticism.

Take a look at the stories in this issue, for example.

Piers Anthony's "Hasan," which I discussed at length last issue, is pretty purely of a type—or is it? As an "Arabian Nights" story, it fits that one sub-type perfectly. But "Hasan" is a story of adventure, of Sword & Sorcery (or "Enchantment & Adventure," as I prefer to think of it in this case), of magic and Gods, and closer to the classic "fairy-tale" (lacking real fairies, of course, as most do) than one commonly finds in today's fantasy magazines. Oh yes: "Hasan" is also a quest-story. (It even has a map.)

On the other hand, Robert Bloch's "The Double Whammy" fits better into

the old *WEIRD TALES* slot. Close-focussed, and realistic up to its closing lines, it is a story of magic-as-retribution. You could call it a "horror story," I suppose.

"Learning It At Miss Rejoy's" is, like most of Bunch's stories, surreal. Bunch has a habit of pulling together various bits and pieces of sf-shorthand—the "hardware," you might say, of science fiction—and putting them together in a way that has little to do with sf at all. His stories are very personal, and require a more specialized taste. Although he has been appearing in this magazine for about a decade, now, he is still a fresh source of controversy among readers, some of whom will hate this story, while others will love it. But I think all would agree: it's a *fantasy*.

Dean Koontz's "The Good Ship Lookoutworld," on the other hand, could as easily have appeared in our sister magazine. Like much fantasy, it is quasi-sf, in that it uses the complete sf framework: the galactic civilization, colorful alien races, the puzzling problem, etc. But Koontz simply does not bother laying down a foundation of science. And although he has successfully used the sf format, his story is really as much a modern tall-tale as it is anything else. (Knew I'd forgotten one: the whole school of the Paul Bunyan Tall Tale is a peculiarly American form of folklore fantasy. We don't see a lot of it these days, although I have a couple Christopher Anvil stories of that type on hand.) But Dean's story *could* be excused as easily for its appearance here by the presence of "science fiction" in our subhead—if you want to draw a hard and fast line between sf and fantasy.

Actually, I picked each story as a complement to the others, to give balance

to the magazine as a whole, and without any prolonged internal debate over their fantasy-content. This balance shifts from issue to issue, of course. I make no effort to insure that we have one story of each of several "types" for each issue. As I've said before, I'm much more concerned with a story's actual quality than its "type."

But because *FANTASTIC* is a "fantasy" magazine, I shall try to be sure that in basic makeup, its contents do not really overlap with those of *AMAZING*. I favor a broad interpretation of the word "fantasy," but I think we can all agree that when we think of "fantasy," we are thinking of something *different* from "science fiction."

I was tempted, solely for argument's sake, to run in our temporarily absent *Fantasy Fandom* department an article by Norman Spinrad which was recently published in *KNIGHT* magazine.

The article purports to explain "fandom" to the masses—or at least to the readership of a non-sf oriented magazine. Spinrad, who seems to have taken upon himself the role of sf's newest gadfly, sets out first to ridicule sf fans and then to upbraid them for (supposedly) destroying all science fiction. This is an untenable position, since it is so demonstrably untrue, but Spinrad milks his theme quite thoroughly, and—to me—offensively.

Once one gets past the opening remarks which are couched in fan slang and then translated for the "squares," one arrives at Spinrad's basic thesis which is that since sf fandom supplies the bulk of sf prodom (most pros being graduate fans, more or less), and the bulk of sf prodom (especially the editors) are hostile to "the New Wave" and the forces of Progress in sf, sf fandom is therefore *per se*

responsible for this hostility, and is forcing the green new sf to wither upon the vine, unpicked and unpublished.

Unfortunately, the amount of sf which has been identified as "New Wave" by both its admirers and detractors gives the lie to this argument. And Spinrad gives himself away when he quotes only one example of adverse criticism of "New Wave" sf by a fan-turned-professional-editor—and without identifying the author of that criticism.

The author was Donald A. Wollheim, the senior editor at Ace Books, and the quote came from a speech he gave as the Guest of Honor at the 1968 Lunacon. His remarks were aimed directly at Norman Spinrad and his novel, *Bug Jack Barron*, which had been submitted to Ace.

I don't want to get into a discussion of the book, and I don't think it is necessary to do more than simply point out that the entire thrust of Spinrad's criticism of fandom-as-a-whole was based upon his personal pique with Don Wollheim's criticisms of the book.

However, I think that in fairness it should be pointed out that while Wollheim was unfailingly critical of the hook, he did not veto editor Terry Carr's desire to publish the hook. Indeed, Ace Books offered a contract for the book, was under the impression that the contract had been accepted, and only later

discovered that a better deal had been accepted with another publisher by Spinrad's agent.

Moreover, despite his personal feelings about that one hook, Donald Wollheim has hardly been a foe of the newer writers in our field. He discovered Samuel R. Delany, for example, and published all Delany's early hooks. He also first published Ursula K. LeGuin in book form. Indeed, Wollheim and Ace have probably been more hospitable to newer young sf writers than any other hook publisher in our country. Since Terry Carr—another fan-turned-pro who gives the lie to Spinrad's argument—joined Ace, there has been an even more equitable balance of tastes. Terry brought Tom Disch to Ace, and in his Ace Specials series has published many, if not most of those writers most commonly identified with the so-called "New Wave."

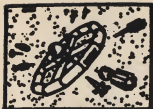
If challenged, I could count off most of those fans who have "graduated" to editorial positions in the publishing world, and, from Judith Merrill on down, I suspect the balance would favor a reasonably progressive and enlightened attitude towards new developments in science fiction.

You hum-rapped us, Norman. You struck out all the way down the line. Have you the courage to admit it?

—Ted White

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